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KISS'n-RUN COWBOY

Howdy, Friends,

Seems like high time we Old-West romance fans got together for a little spell and made some chin music. Your editors have been so busy rounding up rollicking love yarns for your May reading, we've had plumb little time to stop around and set awhile.

Well, we've a mind to mend our ways now. You see, we got to reading such an exciting story of some eye-appealing—and heart-appealing, too—cow bunnies and wranglers, that we just had to pull up and let you know beforehand about "MAVERICK MINX' MAN-TROUBLE."

It's a right pert love novel by our old favorite author, Art Lawson, and it had us wanting to howl at the moon. Well, instead of doing that, we're doing the next best thing: we're printing right below a scene from "MAVERICK MINX' MAN-TROUBLE"—so that *you* can go outside and kick up a little gravel, when you see what a stormy rangeland love yarn is coming up.

JANICE BRITTEN had just bedded down her herd in the strange town called Mutiny. Now she needed supper. Throwing a couple of sacks over the donkey's back, she walked to the only store in town. But when she got there, she found the door locked. A poorly-lettered sign proclaimed:

We Serve
Only
Lazy S

It was that Phil Sampson's fault—that Phil Sampson who had insulted Janice, asked her to sell out the ranch she hadn't even seen yet and leave Mutiny. He owned the Lazy S—and, apparently, the town.

Looking closer, Janice saw that there was a hand behind the sign—a girl's hand, and the girl was hiding.

"Open up!" Janice shouted.

(Please continue on page 96)

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Old-West Novel of a Wild-and-Woolly Beauty

By Marian O'Hearn

CHAPTER ONE

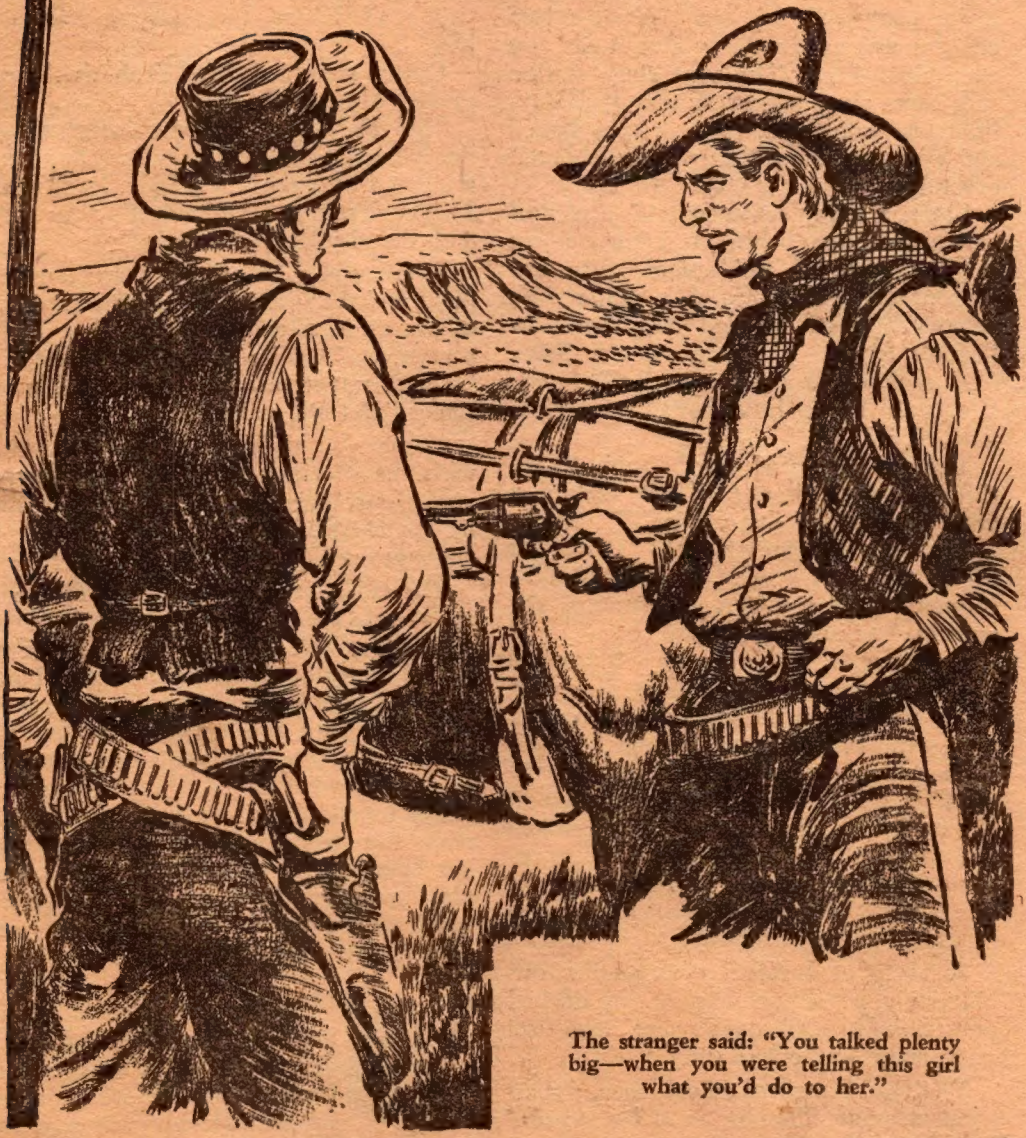
Strange Rider

AT THE edge of the Overland Trail, Lorna eased the team to a stop and got down to slacken the horses' headgear. When the reins were adjusted, she rolled up the side canvas and fastened a two-foot price sign to the top of the wagon.

Swinging back into the seat, she pulled her had brim down over her eyes and glanced at the scene around her. A few yards away, on the left, was a small tent

SWEETHEART OF GUNSMOKE TRAIL

Lorna had saved the outlaw's life—
but she didn't have to lose her heart to him . . .
did she?



The stranger said: "You talked plenty big—when you were telling this girl what you'd do to her."

labeled *"Groceries"* and, on the other side, its canvas still lowered, was a prairie schooner which bore the scrawled words: *"Bourbon Whiskey Sold Here."*

Huddled well back from the cross-continent roadway were the wagons, tents and camps of travelers who had stopped to rest before pushing on through the mountains.

A burst of thick laughter came from the whiskey wagon and Lorna saw that a line of men waited at the rear. They were impatient but grimly determined to get their share of the bourbon.

The rolling pound of hoofs pulled her glance back to the trail. A long wagon-train composed of ten rider-escorted coaches was approaching. But it did not even slow down. The next stage station was hours away and every minute of daylight was important. The drivers waved and everyone along the roadside shouted greetings.

Later, a single schooner with a pair of exhausted oxen behind it rattled down slope, turned off and stopped. An unshaven man got out and, walking with heavy stiffness, brought two pans to Lorna's wagon. "Howdy, ma'am. Some fresh milk is just what we need right now. We could use a little butter, too. How much is it?"

The girl measured out the milk. "Like the sign says: butter is five dollars a pound—milk a dollar a quart."

The bearded man whistled. "Prices get higher the farther west we go." But he counted out the money and carried the pans back to his own wagon.

Lorna covered the milk jar and dropped the money into the coin box. A hoarse shout broke from the whiskey wagon and two men, locked savagely together, fell through the rear opening. They struck the ground, still flailing at each other with clenched fists. The waiting line rocked with laughter. The men continued to struggle until they threatened to break up the line of would-be drinkers, when they were separated and booted away.

A party of Indians, eyes staring unblinkingly, passed on slow-moving unshod ponies. A fast mail coach swept down trail and plunged on, out of sight.

The road remained empty, then, for almost an hour. The owner of the grocery tent emerged, stuck a pipe into his mouth and sat down in the sun. The line in front of the whiskey tent grew longer.

Light flickered far up the slope. Glittered, as if dancing against metal. Lorna pushed her eyelashes together as she watched. A horseman was approaching. Apparently, he was completely alone, traveling without supply wagon or pack horse and the metallic glitter came from his hat band. He was riding slowly, slumped in the saddle of a big bay and his head was lowered as if in sleep.

"Got more company," a heavy-faced man who had just emerged from the whiskey tent called. "Look, boys. A lone trail wolf. Fancy, too, judging from the hat."

Others stumbled out. "Yeah, that's real pretty. Maybe it's gold."

"Maybe he needs a little welcome. Wonder if I could clip that fancy hat-band with a bullet from here? Say, Mac, let's try it. I'll get first shot. If I miss it's your turn and the drinks are on me."

There was a bellowing roar of amusement and the heavy-faced man waved the others aside. Stepping forward, he lifted a revolver from its holster and leveled it. "Tough target in the sunlight," he muttered. "But I'll make it."

Lorna shot to her feet, her body taut with the shock, her lips parting over a wild, protesting cry. But she would not let the cry sound for it might make him shoot at once.

The rider, coming down the trail, was apparently drowsing in the saddle, completely unaware of danger. The whiskey-crazed men would kill him to win a round of drinks! Horror and fury drove through her, ending the shocked helplessness. She bent, took a rifle from behind the seat and lifted it to her shoulder. Pressing her lashes together until her eyes were almost shut, she steadied the long gun, forcing her breathing to shallowness to keep her aim accurate. And, as the drunkard's hand moved on the hammer of his revolver, she squeezed down.

HEN the rifle exploded, driving the butt against her shoulder, there was a savage howl from the man before the whiskey tent. His gun was gone and he was clutching a bleeding wrist. The

entire group turned to face her, started forward on unsteady feet.

"Say, you there! You can't go around shooting people up! What's the idea?"

Lorna settled the rifle against her shoulder again and felt for the hammer. "Don't come any closer. He was going to kill a stranger as a joke. All of you were willing to watch him shoot down someone you'd never seen."

The wounded man staggered forward, still clutching his wrist. "If you weren't a woman, I'd load you with lead. But there happens to be some law, even on the Overland Trail. I'm going to see it deals with you."

"That's right," the owner of the whiskey tent added. "The town of Pine Point's only five miles from here. They've got a Citizen's Committee that'll try you right on the spot. There are plenty of witnesses—"

"More witnesses than you think, hombre. Here's one you hadn't counted on."

The strange voice cut the air into silence, each word blackly resonant as the snap of lead. It was the man who had been picked for a target. He was standing at the edge of the crowd, a leveled short gun in his hands.

The wide-brimmed hat was still on his head and its metal band seemed even more glittering. Sun and wind had overlaid his skin with a thin patina of bronze and his hair was fair as pyrite. Even his mountain-blue eyes were flecked with bits of golden light.

The whiskey seller and the wounded man stared, while the others, suddenly sobering, shifted away. "You're—"

"Yeah." The black whip of his voice cracked again. "I'm the jasper you were going to use for target practice."

"We didn't intend to hurt you."

"Sure, if the slug didn't go through my head I would've lived. You." His gun gestured at the man with the wounded wrist. "You can still use an iron in your left hand. I'll shoot with my left, too. Draw your gun and we'll walk out onto the trail where other people won't get hurt. One of your pals can give the word. Ready?

The heavy face sagged. "I gotta have my arm taken care of. I'm hurt. Anyway, it was just a joke."

The stranger said: "You talked plenty big—when you were telling this girl what you'd do to her."

"Let's forget it," the whiskey dealer said, forcing sudden, hearty tolerance into his voice. "Just one of those things. Come on Frank, we'll bandage you up. Got plenty of stuff in the wagon."

He led the injured man away and Lorna sat down, abruptly, letting the rifle fall from her hands. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the trail but the smell of its violence filled her nostrils and her senses. The hordes hurrying over the pathway to a new land marked their journey with ugliness and death. . . .

"That was shooting, ma'am. Pretty shooting, anywhere or anytime. And I'm glad to be able thank you."

Her lashes lifted and she looked into eyes the color of a mountain stream. The flecks of light seemed to be lifting from blue, clear depths. Water as blue as that was usually colder than ice and its touch searing as fire.

"There's no reason to thank me. Anyone would have—"

"Just the same, you stopped them. I won't forget that, ma'am—or forget you."

She straightened and looked at him with an evenness which put distance between them. But before she could speak, he said: "I ought to see you home. If that gang gets any drunker and you're still here, they may try to do some more bullying."

He had taken off the bright-banded hat and she saw that the pyrite-fair hair, cut very short gave an unexpected boyishness to his darkly golden face.

"It would be better for me to leave, now. But there's no reason for you to come with me. I make this trip once or twice every week and I carry more than one gun."

"Just the same, I've got to be sure none of them follow you. I owe you my life, ma'am. That gives me the right to look after you."

"Right?" Lorna's tone was startled.

He grinned and the blue of his eyes softened, the light flecks warmed. "Just one way of putting it."

His smile was as young as his fair, close-clipped hair. And there was no coolness on his clear-cornered mouth.

She hesitated, gently said: "But it'll

delay you. If you're heading for the next stage station on the trail, you won't make it before dark."

"I'm not heading for any special place. Just traveling. In fact, this part of the country may be just what I'm looking for. Am I going to ride home with you?"

Lorna's lips curved, abruptly, and a dimple dug fleetingly into one cheek. "That seems to have been settled. If you'll tighten up the traces and the horses' headgear, I'll put down the canvas."

She had the wagon closed when he handed her the reins. "I left my pony on the other side of the trail. I'll be with you by the time you're straightened out."

As she wheeled the team across the road, he cantered toward her. "How far is it?" he asked, maneuvering his pony so that he would be even with the seat of the wagon.

"About an hour and a half southeast."

"I've been trying to figure out why you go to the Overland Trail to sell your stuff. It's about the most dangerous thing a girl could do."

Her lips curved again but the dimple did not show in her cheek. "I make extra money selling butter and milk. We started our spread less than two years ago, which means it hasn't yet begun to show much of a profit. We can use the extra money."

His blue glance flicked toward the road ahead and returned to her face. "We?" he reported.

Lorna's eyes once more put distance between them. "Yes. My parents own the Running H Ranch." She leaned forward and snapped the whip over the horses. "Talking slows us up."

HE WAS silent and she kept her eyes straight ahead, wishing she had refused to let him escort her back to the ranch. Even though she did not speak or look at him, she was unable to shut him out of her mind for a single, brief moment. It was his strange, almost bizarre fairness which was disturbing her, of course. His odd, golden look. Or was it a look of bright hardness? Gold was the most unalterable of metals. . . .

When she turned the team into the final stretch of the wagon road, she slowed the horses to a walk and nodded toward the gates ahead. "That's the ranch. Thanks for coming with me. I hope it won't mean you'll be night-bound on the trail."

"I've told you that I'm not in hurry—except to find a job. Heard there's a big ranch near Pine Point, that's always taking on new hands. The name of it was Broken Peak Ranch. Know where it is?"

Lorna's gray eyes darkened with surprise. "Yes," she said. After the wagon moved through the gates, she added: "It's the largest spread in this part of the territory. It was started, just a few years ago by a wealthy Easterner named Bailey. He was a strange old man who lived there like a hermit, seeing no one except his outfit or his lawyer.

"He seemed to hate the world and everyone in it. Before he died the place was an armed camp with riders patroling his home ranch to keep others away. Now the ranch is being run by a foreman, until it can be decided who inherits the place. Howard Bailey left no will and, apparently, no heirs. At least, that's the story."

She wrapped the reins around the whipstock and the man stepped from the saddle. "Let me help you down."

"No thanks. I'd rather—"

He was standing close to the wheel, blocking her way, his hands lifting to her waist. The blue of his eyes was no longer mountain-chilled. The clearly-marked corners of his mouth were tilting upward into a steady, waiting, knowing smile.

"No," she repeated and turned quickly to avoid him. But her foot slid over the edge of the wagon floor and she felt herself falling.

His hands stopped her fall. They closed on her waist and lifted her. His arms went around her to support her and, for a hurtling, unreal moment, she was held tightly against his strangely golden body which was as hard as actual metal. His mouth was directly above her own.

"I didn't intend this," he said, the words whispering against her face. "But your lips are exactly the color of Indian Lotus. Blossoms that have to be tasted—"

"Lorna!" Her father's voice was almost shouting and hoofs she had not heard approaching slapped to a halt beside the wagon. "Lorna," Frank Hudson repeated. "What's happening here? What—"

The stranger explained: "It's all right

now, sir. Miss—the young lady caught her foot and started to fall."

Hudson dropped from the saddle, his eyes bleakly disbelieving. "Who are you?" he demanded, and although taller than average, he was forced to look up at the stranger.

"I'm—" His voice became resonant with darkness as he hesitated. "My name's Stan—Blackwell."

"Dad." Lorna went on to her father's side and put a hand on his arm. "I ran into trouble on the trail and this—Mr. Blackwell rode to the ranch with me. He wanted to be sure I was safe." She looked directly into the eyes which once more were blue as the highest mountain stream. "This is my father, Frank Hudson."

Blackwell put out his hand but Hudson ignored it. "I'm grateful if you protected Lorna, but don't let us interrupt your travels any longer. Good day, sir."

Stan Blackwell nodded, pulled on his wide-brimmed hat, and jerked it well down over his eyes. "Afternoon, ma'am," he murmured as he stepped into the saddle.

She turned to watch him ride to the gates. His fringed elkskin blouse was taut across his flat, straight back. And its color seemed to blend with the golden tones of hair and skin. Just as when he had bent over her, his mouth above her own, his tawny face glowing with the flare of sudden light—or fire.

CHAPTER TWO

Marry for Money

THE sun was high and sharp when Lorna rode out of the foothills where she had spent the afternoon helping her father round up strays. She loosened her neckerchief and took off her hat to let the breeze cool her skin. A pair of magpies swept from the brush, swooped toward her and alighting in a pine tree, broke into high, mocking chatter. Other magpies raced to join them.

Why did she keep thinking of Stan Blackwell? Her father was probably right. He was another of the homeless, lawless men who were forever drifting through the territory or across the continent.

She stopped her pony, turned to watch some doves fly away. As her face tilted to the sky, the sharp sunlight measured its beauty. The feathery tendrils which escaped from the braids now wound about her head were sheened as silk. Her forehead was full and broad. A finely moulded, grave forehead emphasized by straight dark brows. The laughing eyes were gray, clear as silver, black centered and shadowed by black lashes. Her lips were brilliant as scarlet but softer toned and more disturbing.

She was small, but her strong young body gave her a look of fluid pliancy which made her seem almost tall. Her doeskin shirt was beaded and fringed, but low-necked enough to require a scarf. A divided riding skirt, also of doeskin, was full and simply made, short enough to show the tops of soft leather boots.

"Your lips are like Indian Lotus."

She straightened impatiently and sent the pony into a canter. What was the matter with her? Thinking of lotus blossoms and watching doves swim into the heavens. She pushed her mount to a gallop and saw the opening of a well-kept wagon road directly ahead. On each side of the road, a posted sign warned: *"No trespassing."*

Lorna pulled down and eyed the sign resentfully. The road, leading through part of the Broken Peak Ranch had been built by Howard Bailey for his own use. When, during the last year of his life, neighbors had ignored the sign and ridden over it, he had detailed armed riders to keep them away. Yet it led directly south, and would cut several miles off the trip to the Running H.

"It probably isn't guarded any longer," she decided, grinned, and wheeled her pony past the signs, nudged him into a hard canter. Suddenly her hands closed on the reins and silence clamped over her. The pine brush had stirred, was breaking apart. A horse jumped through the opening and the man in the saddle was holding a leveled gun.

The gun lowered even before he slid to a halt. "Well, for—I'm sorry, ma'am. Hope I didn't scare you."

"Yes you did." But even as she spoke her breathing slowed to normal and the tightness left her nerves. There was nothing frightening about this tall, almost slight-framed man whose hazel eyes were

suddenly very anxious and apologetic.

"I heard someone charging along this road, and—" He broke off, his eyes losing their anxiety and becoming intent. "Still, I'm glad I waited. If I hadn't I'd have missed *you.*"

"You might have used that gun before you saw me clearly."

He put the gun away. "No chance. I always make a point of looking at people before shooting them."

His grin was diffident but his hazel eyes lighted and she noticed that in the sun they were the color of amber, and his hair was a definite red.

"How can I convince you that I don't make a habit of killing girls?" he asked. "Not pretty girls. I'm Tim Whelen and I came here a week ago—"

"Came here? To the Broken Peak?"

He nodded and the faint, diffident grin showed again. "I'm the new owner. Howard Bailey was my uncle. As the only surviving heir, I inherited it."

Lorna's voice lowered. "Then he did have relatives."

"Just me. His lawyers located me in Texas. But you don't sound too pleased with your new neighbor."

Her lips curved and the single dimple appeared. "But I am. Welcome to the Colorado Territory. My name is Lorna Hudson." She put out her hand.

He held it for a prolonged moment. The hazel glance hurried from her eyes to her mouth.

She freed her hand and a flush spread up his jaws.

"Won't you come up to the house and have cold lemonade?"

"No, thank you." Her lips began to shape the words automatically. But she broke off and said, almost hurriedly, "Yes. I'd like that."

No one on the range had seen the inside of the Bailey house which was supposed to be a place of fabulous luxury. Entering its doors, sitting in the living room which had belonged to the fierce, old recluse, would be an adventure.

Whelen's amber glance reached for her abruptly and almost greedily. "Follow me," he said. "That way, you can be sure I won't start playing with my gun again."

The pine tree brush ended at the intersection of another wagon road and Tim Whelen turned east. "We'll hit the range lane in a few minutes," he said. "How about taking a chance on riding beside me now?"

LORNA nodded solemnly, but the dimple flickered in her cheek and her gray eyes were bright as polished silver. The lane was lined with tall cottonwoods and the yard was apart from the house. Beyond the space occupied by bunksheds, cookshacks, corrals and barns was a tall, carefully trimmed hedge. Small white gates led through the hedge and, on each side of the gate, were long hitchracks.

They dismounted and a wrangler hurried across the yard to take care of the ponies. "Leave them here," Whelen said. "We'll be using them again."

Beyond the hedge was a lawn and flower beds. And, at the edge of the lawn, backed against tall, shade trees was a house which might have been part of an eastern estate. Windows were big, wide and numerous. Wide, shallow steps mounted pleasantly to a veranda which ran across the entire front of the building.

Inside were polished floors, deep rugs and richly finished furniture. The entrance hall and living room were high ceilinged and created a sense of airy space. The stairway to the second floor was wondingly lovely and a landing, at ceiling level was long as a mezzanine.

"This is beautiful." Lorna's voice was almost hushed. "Your uncle understood beauty or he couldn't have created it."

"I suppose so." Tim Whelen turned back to the hall and clapped his hands lightly. "We'll have that lemonade now. How about cake?"

"No, thank you." A thin, gray-haired Chinese dressed in black came silently into the room.

"Ho Lee," Whelen said. "This is Miss Lorna Hudson, one of our neighbors. Ho Lee," he explained, "had been with my uncle, as a houseboy, for years before he died. Worked for him before he started the Broken Peak."

"You'd like refreshments," the Chinese said. "What will they be?"

"Lemonade, very cold, for Miss Hudson. I'll have some brandy."

The lemonade was in a tall, frosted ice-

tinkling glass. As the girl sipped it, her body relaxed against the cushioned softness of the deep chair. Her lashes moved together and veiled her eyes. This was the sort of living she had heard and read about but never quite believed.

She grinned, and put down her glass. "Send for the magic carpet. It's time for me to go home. Or do I make the return trip on just an ordinary bronc?"

"We'll have to use horses, but—" his amber-hazel glance thrust toward her, reaching demandingly—"anything's as good as a magic carpet while I'm with you."

He opened the heavy outer door and she walked quickly to the wide, shallow steps. As they went through the hedge gates, a pony stopped at one of the hitchracks and the rider stepped down. The band on his hat shimmered and she had a glimpse of eyes which were blue as a mountain stream.

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Hello! I didn't expect to meet you here."

"Why not? A job's a job."

He turned away, pulling on the metal-banded hat, and Tim Whelen said, "You—hold it." Each word seemed to spurt from Tim's lips and his voice had roughened. "I want to talk to you."

Stan Blackwell's stride slowed and he heeled about. "Talking to me? Or your horse?"

Tim Whelen stopped as if his throat had suddenly closed. He stared at Blackwell with darkening eyes. "How'd you get on this spread?"

"I work here. Fred Simpson, the foreman, hired me last night. Any objections?"

Tim Whelen seemed to become even taller, as if his lightly boned frame were being thrust forcibly upward. "Maybe I have." But the words lost their force before he finished them. His glance shot toward the girl and flicked, almost uneasily, back to Blackwell. "Who are you? Where'd you come from?"

"The name's Stan Blackwell." The corners of his mouth tilted a little. "I come from a lot of places. So many, that I can't remember the names of all of them."

"Sometimes there are reasons for not remembering. I," Whelen hurried on as if to avoid an answer, "am the new owner of the Broken Peak."

The mountain blue eyes looked steadily into Whelen's face. "Howdy."

Tim Whelen nodded. "I haven't had time to meet everybody in the outfit but I'll get around to it. He turned to the hitchrack, untied the girl's pony and helped her into the saddle.

When he swung up and they started into the lane, Stan Blackwell was half way across the yard, his long-legged stride taking him swiftly toward the bunkshed.

"He—acted strange, didn't he?" Lorna asked.

Whelen's glance touched her eyes, pressing against their surface. "This country's full of tough hombres who don't want to talk about themselves."

IT WAS dusk when they reached the Running H. As they pulled in before the door, the girl's mother came down the steps. Lorna introduced Whelen, explaining that she had visited the Broken Peak. Mrs. Hudson welcomed him gravely and added: "We'd be glad to have you for supper, if you can stay."

"Not tonight, but soon. There was something I wanted to talk to Lorna about. I'm figuring on giving some parties to get acquainted with all my neighbors and thought she could help me."

"That'll be nice." Helen Hudson beamed at him. "Finish your talk then. Supper'll be ready soon, Lorna," she added and hurried back into the house.

"You mentioned parties," the girl started to say, but Whelen interrupted.

"Yes, but that can wait." He moved closer and bent to see her face through the twilight mist. "I had to have a chance to ask if you *want* me to come back."

"Of course. I'll be expecting you."

"Don't say it like that. Say it as if it's important to you."

She looked up at him. "How can I know so soon?"

"Lorna, you're laughing." His hands closed on her arms. "You won't laugh at me. I won't let you," he said, his voice hoarse, his breath striking against her cheek.

She turned her head sharply to avoid

his kiss, protesting, "I'm not laughing!"

But he put a hand against her cheek and brought her mouth back to his. There was almost breathless determination in his lips. His hands slid up her arms to her shoulders and tightened but she stepped backward, out of his arms. "Good night, Tim," she said.

He bent down to her again. "You're not offended? Or through with me?"

"No-o. Let's not talk right now."

"Can I see you tomorrow night?"

"Yes. After supper."

She turned into the house and wondered why there was the taste of tears in her mouth. . . .

Tim Whelen arrived at eight o'clock. When Lorna opened the door his hazel eyes brightened to amber. "You're even prettier than yesterday. What've you done to your hair? It looks like wild honey."

"I've seen wild honey, so I'm not very impressed." She laughed at him knowing that the frost-gray dotted Swiss dress was as flattering as candlelight.

"Wait." He drew her back as she started toward the living room. "I came in a buckboard. Let's go for a drive."

"Yes! We can reach Sky Table in half an hour and it's always lovely there."

They ran down the steps together and the girl laughed softly as he settled her in the buckboard seat. "I usually feel penned in at night," she said. "Dad won't let me leave the ranch alone. He thinks the territory's too dangerous."

"It is." Whelen's voice went low. "This part of it in particular. They say it's becoming a hideout for gunnies and—"

"Let's not think about it. The moon's coming up."

He turned his head to look at her and a slow, diffident smile edged his lips. But, before the smile was fully formed, he leaned forward and snapped the whip over the horses, sending the buckboard racing toward the foothills.

Sky Table was a long, hard climb and the horses were winded when they reached the top. Whelen pulled in, close to the edge of the great flat mountaintop and wrapped the reins around the whipstock. The moon was below them, but lifting swiftly.

"This is one of the prettiest spots I've seen here," Tim murmured. "The valley down there looks like a placid lake—"

"Listen!" Lorna broke in. "Do you hear it?"

The earth and the air seemed to be shaking. A drumming sound pulsed through the night. "A buffalo herd. Let's get out, quick."

She scrambled from the buckboard and hurried to the edge of the rock plateau. "There they are—coming from the north," she cried and pointed to the great, dark blotch moving across the valley. The huge, heavy beasts were traveling in a compact mass, the bulls on the outside of the herd, cows and calves in the easily protected middle. As they neared the end of the open stretch, shadows stirred on the hillsides and then plunged downward. Great, heavy shapes which had been standing motionlessly above, acting as sentinels for the herd.

"They're majestic creatures," the girl said, watching them disappear.

"From a distance. Close up, they're ugly and awkward." Whelen turned to her, his glance blazing into amber as it found her eyes. "I hope you're real, Lorna, but I can't believe it."

He was bending down to her and her breath pulled in sharply. He was going to kiss her. Would the strange urgency be in his touch? The moonlight struck across his face, showing the lines of his mouth as it came down to hers. . . .

HOOF struck against rock and pebbles rattled. Whelen straightened and his hand dropped to the gun at his thigh. But the horseman who rode over the edge of the ledge, called, casually: "Evening, folks. Howdy, ma'am."

"Blackwell," Tim Whelen said, "What's the idea?"

"Of what?" Stan Blackwell stepped down and pulled off the metal-banded hat.

"Of coming here."

Blackwell's clearly marked lip corners tilted. "I followed the buffalo herd. Quite a sight, wasn't it?"

In the moonlight, the gold of his skin seemed duskier. And he looked taller, bigger, his eyes bluer.

"So you've seen it," Whelen said, his voice edged. "Miss Hudson and I are hav-

ing a conversation. A private talk."

"In that case, I'll ride on." Stan Blackwell's glance was on Lorna, searching her face, pausing on her mouth. " 'Night." He swung back into the saddle and turned his pony.

Your lips are like Indian Lotus.

"We'd better go," she said. "It's late."

"Did you decide that because he showed up?"

Her head lifted and she looked at him levelly. "I'm not sure, but I still want to start for home."

Whelen helped Lorna into the buckboard. As soon as they reached the bottom of the slope, he snapped the whip above the horses' backs.

"Here we are. The Running H." Whelen's tone was thin and distant. He stopped the horses before the door but instead of getting out, began to wrap the reins about the whip-stock. "I meant what I said about having a party," he told her. "I want to give one, in a few days for you. Would you like that?"

"Yes, I certainly would! It's hard to remember what a real party is like."

"But will it mean more because it's in my home and you're *my* guest?"

Lorna hesitated, searching for words, and he seemed to go still with waiting. She drew a slow breath which felt cold against her lips. "I'm not sure of how to answer."

He stirred. "I'll make you want to be sure. Will you kiss me as if I were the only man you could kiss?"

"Tim, I—I—"

Whelan's mouth was over hers. His arms were warm and claiming. Her lashes dropped to veil her eyes and the moonlight was a faraway mist. . . .

The sharp clarity of the moonlight returned. Tim Whelen's mouth still clung to hers. She moved uneasily away from him feeling as if she must escape from the driving need of his will.

"I've got to go in. Mother'll be waiting."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget about the party, either. It's to be all yours." He helped her down, took her to the door and waited until she had closed it behind her.

As she reached the living room, her father pulled himself, sleepily, out of a chair. "Waited up to see you," he said, "because your mother was tired. Tomorrow's the day for another trip to the Overland Trail—but you're not to go."

"Why?"

"It's become too dangerous. This whole section's in a turmoil. There've been shootings and holdups in town. The Citizen's Committee is holding nightly meetings."

"How could the situation become that bad so quickly?"

Frank Hudson shook his head. "We'd like the answers—especially to why Pine Point is becoming a headquarters for gunnies. And several known outlaws are supposed to be around the Broken Peak. I can't believe it, unless—" his eyes met hers—"they're thinking of that fellow Blackwell. He looked like an hombre straight off the gun-smoke trail to me."

"You've no reason to say that, Dad. He's a cowman. The Broken Peak wouldn't have hired an inexperienced hand."

"Maybe, but he's got the stamp of a gunfighter on him."

The stamp of a gunfighter. Lorna remembered the words when she was in bed, sleeplessly studying the darkness. And Tim Whelen, who wanted her to be unable to kiss any other man. Was that what she wanted? Tim and the Bailey house, the Bailey wealth?

CHAPTER THREE

The Shebang Is Over

CAREFULLY Lorna stood before the mirror in her bedroom, excitement as warm as laughter lifted into her throat. She was wearing the dress her mother had made for Tim Whelen's party. It was of blue organdy, with an off-the-shoulder neckline, tiny sleeves, a tight bodice and wide, spreading skirt supported by stiffened petticoats.

The warmth left her throat and she turned from the glass to face her mother. "It's beautiful," Lorna said. "I don't know how you ever made the dress in such a short time."

Mrs. Hudson smiled. "It's right for you, Lorna. You're a pretty girl . . ." Her voice trailed off and her eyes became thoughtful. "Maybe, some day you'll be

mistress of the big Broken Peak Ranch."

"That's a crazy thing to say! I haven't—" But she cut off her thought. There was no reason to feel this sudden, shaking anger, less reason not to consider a pleasant, secure future and Tim's love. "I think I heard the buckboard stop," she said hurriedly.

She crossed the living room to the hall and, as she reached the door, a knock sounded. "I'm all ready," she said, opening the door. "You got here at exactly the right time."

The words dropped back into her throat and crushed out all the laughter. It was not Tim Whelen, but Stan Blackwell who entered. He stopped just inside the threshold. "Sorry to break in on you like this but it's important."

Lorna glanced uncomfortably through the open door. It was time for Tim to arrive. She closed the door and walked with obvious haste into the living room. "I've only got a few minutes."

He dropped his hat on a chair, refused to sit down and stood before her, his body poised as if in readiness for something which must come. "I'll make it fast. Don't go to the party at the Broken Peak tonight."

"Don't go?" Her lashes spread widely apart and color stung into her cheeks. "Are you *telling* me or asking me not to go?"

"Both. This whole range is boiling. There's trouble in town and out of it. The place is full of gunnies and hombres wanted by half the lawmen in the country. And I don't like the setup on the Broken Peak. Something's going to break there, and when it does—it'll be plenty rough."

"What could break? What's wrong?"

His mountain-blue glance thrust down at her, caught her own glance and held it. "I can't explain because you wouldn't believe me. But stay home."

The sudden color in her cheeks took on the fierceness of flame. "You can't stop me. Besides—" anger edged her voice—"I've heard that the range wonders what you're doing here. Why a man who's obviously a professional gun-fighter is working on Tim Whelen's spread."

His mouth changed, stiffening until the corners were straight. But his glance did not release hers. Nor could she free herself by looking away, for he was holding her captive, making her helpless to even conceal her thoughts from him.

"Lorna," His voice was low, resonant darkness. The blue of his eyes was no longer chill and his skin was like pale fire. He bent until his face was close to hers but made no attempt to touch her. "I wish you could believe me without demanding proof because I can't tell you anything more. The stakes I'm playing for are too high to risk."

The scent of sunshine crept into her senses. The smell of sun-drenched metal. Bright, valuable metal, but unalterable. "What are the stakes you're playing for?"

"You."

The scent of sun, air and metallic warmth was part of him, of his golden flesh, his fair hair, even the clothing he wore. His lips were on hers although she could not remember when the kiss had started. His mouth was part of her own, shaping it and blending into it. The hidden glow was swirling into explosive fierceness. It fused into one beat, into a single, gigantic stroke. And he was part of that, was sharing it. She felt herself relaxing, moving helplessly into his arms.

His mouth left hers and he was suddenly apart, away from her, a tall, dark golden stranger. "There's a buckboard stopping at the door. It's probably Tim Whelen, so I'll go out the back way. That'll make things easier for you."

"No!" She looked up at him with clear, steady eyes. "I'll meet him at the door because I'm going to the Broken Peak."

EVEN at midnight the party still seemed unreal to Lorna. She could not believe she was here in the lovely, flower-decked house dancing to music which gave her wings. After an unusually long dance with Tim Whelen, she started upstairs to check her appearance. As she reached the long mezzanine-like landing, the orchestra started again and she paused to look down at the dancers.

The high-ceilinged hall and large living room had been turned into a ballroom. The twenty-piece orchestra was on a flower-banked corner stand. Maids, recruited in Pine Point, moved through the crowd with trays of drinks while Ho Lee, the house-

boy, waited beside the gleaming buffet table.

Everyone in the district, including the Broken Peak outfit, had been invited and everyone had come. The girls were in thin, bright dresses and the men in fancy shirts and ornate boots. Laughter and young gaiety surged through the atmosphere almost as strongly as the music. This was a night to remember.

A man paused at the bottom of the stairs, glanced at Lorna and started up. She straightened and shaped her lips into a careful smile. Stan Blackwell. She would make him realize that she had completely forgotten the moments in his arms.

"Enjoying this?" He stood beside her.

"I didn't know there could be such parties." She kept her gaze on the floor below.

Ho Lee left the buffet table and crossed the dance floor to the stairs. He halted and peered upward, his dark eyes on Stan Blackwell.

"Yeah," Blackwell said, as if continuing a conversation. "Any girl would want a place like this and the kind of life that goes with it. It'd be pleasant—even without love, wouldn't it?" He stared at her.

Warmth was shooting up her throat into her cheeks. "It ought to be," she said evenly.

"The owner of the Broken Peak—Tim Whelen—is a rich man. You ought to be content."

He moved away before she could speak and started down the stairs. Ho Lee was still staring at him and, as he reached the first floor, demanded: "What is your name, sir? I haven't seen you before. I should know the names of all the guests."

"Stan Blackwell. I'm not a guest, exactly. I work here."

Both he and the Chinese disappeared into the crowd, then, and Tim came looking for her. "Are you hiding?" he demanded. "This is our dance."

She went down with him, moved into his arms and let the music add its wings once more. *"Any girl would want this . . . even without love."* She pushed the thought away and smiled at Tim, whose arms tightened around her.

The music paused, hurried on and stopped. A shout had sounded from some-

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where. The dancers were crowding together, looking toward the front door. Tim whirled and started away at a run.

Lorna followed him into the hall and heard a roughly angry voice saying: "That's what happened, boss. The few of us on night range didn't have a chance. There must've been fifty men in the gang. They came down out of the hills with their guns blazing and started driving the stock off right before our eyes. When I saw them last they were traveling south—they'll probably sweep up any other cattle they run into."

The crowd shifted and Lorna saw the sweat-streaked, grim-mouthed young rider who had brought news of the raid.

"No," he said, in answer to Tim's questions. "Nobody killed. One of the boys was nicked. But they got a couple of hundred head."

Whelen strode to the middle of the living room. "Listen, neighbors," he said, lifting his voice so that it would carry. "This job belongs to all of us. If rustlers are starting to work this section they'll strip all stock from the ranges before they quit. Let's find them. They haven't got too much of a headstart."

The men rushed toward the room where they had left their weapons but Tim stopped them. "There's no time to take the women home and it wouldn't be safe for them to start out alone. When we get back, we'll see everyone gets safely home. In the meantime, ladies, make yourselves comfortable. Ask Ho Lee for anything you want."

He went to Lorna, then, strapping on ammunition belt and guns. "Promise me you won't try to leave?" he asked. "Unless I know you'll stay here, I'll have to let the others start without me. I can't take a chance on you being harmed."

"It seems unnecessary, but I'll stay if that will keep you from worrying."

"Thanks." His hazel glance reached down into her eyes and his hand closed briefly, tightly on her shoulder. "Wait for me."

Bootheels stamped against polished floors, men called to each other as they hurried out. Hoofs danced impatiently, broke into swift beating which died away and left abrupt silence.

The girls and women looked at each other and then at the suddenly uninteresting ballroom. They moved into groups and talked in low, anxious voices or moved about aimlessly. The musicians were matter-of-factly putting away their instruments. The party was over.

LORNA started for the second floor and, encountering Ho Lee at the head of the stairs, said: "I'd like to rest. Mr. Whelen said you'd show us to the bedrooms." He bowed her along the hall.

He opened a door. "This should be comfortable. Do you want anything else?"

"No, thank you."

The room, like the rest of the house, was exquisitely luxurious. A great deep bed, thick carpets, deep chairs, a bookcase and a couch placed near a long double-window.

Lorna turned down the oil lamps on either side of the bed and stretched out on the couch, where she could watch the moonlit sky. If she could get word to her parents . . . but they would probably hear of the cattle raid.

Her lashes drooped and she fell into a light uneasy sleep. She imagined someone was near her. Her hair stirred as if touched by a breeze. Her eyes opened and she was completely awake.

There was someone beside her—a man whose face was close to her hair, as if he were touching it with his lips. The scent of sun and light-drenched metal reached her nostrils.

"Stan." She sat up. "Is anything wrong?"

"Ho Lee said you were here. I thought you might like to go home instead of waiting for Whelen to come back." He murmured low, "Lorna, your lips really are the color of Indian Lotus—the flower that is like a fruit and has to be tasted."

"Don't say things like that. I won't listen." But the sunwarmed scent had reached her blood and her pulses were turning into a single wild beating in her throat.

Stan's seeking mouth became part of hers even as it shaped her kiss and the pulse in her throat was echoing the pounding of his heart as well as her own. She knew that she was clinging to him. Maybe she had known from the first second that

this had to be. Perhaps there was no way to evade life or escape it.

The door snapped open, and the single, lone sound was thunderously loud. Two men strode across the room. Men with dark, tight, strange faces and leveled guns in their hands. "You're coming with us, Blackwell. Don't try to reach your irons."

One of the men flipped Stan's short guns out of their holsters. "Start for the door. Make it fast."

The girl stumbled up to her feet. "Where are you taking him? Wait! Why—"

"Shut up, lady, if you're smart."

The door slammed in her face and she stared at it for a full second before she aroused enough to wrench it open. The hall was empty and she ran to the stairs, down to the landing. There was no one on the lower floor, but they must still be inside the house.

A door slammed, somewhere in the rear of the building, and she raced down the steps. But as she reached the entrance hall, hoofs echoed from beyond the hedge. They had gotten away, forcing Stan to go with them.

She whirled back into the hall, raced to the heavy front door, and finally got it open. The buckboards and carriages had been placed directly beyond the hedge to the right of the gates. The teams had not been unhitched and Tim Whelen's buckboard might still be there, ready for use.

Dust and sand poured into her high-heeled slippers as she hurried along the rows of carriages. But she saw Whelen's buckboard at last and climbed into it. His horses were strong and fast. They'd get her home quickly enough for her father to organize a search for Stan.

She loosened the reins, snapped the whip. Snapped it again as she straightened out on the wagon road. The hard, dark faces of the men who had taken him prisoner at gun point. But why—why had Stan returned to the house? Everyone had been expected to follow the cattle raiders.

It seemed endless hours later when she reached the Running H and drove across the yard to the house. Without waiting to fasten the reins, she got out and pounded up the steps, pushed open the door.

The living room was lighted. Her mother was there, sitting very quietly.

"Where's dad?"

"Some of the Citizen's Committee came for him. A lot of cattle's been stolen—"

"I know." She felt as if her feet were becoming fixed to the floor and that she might never again move. Maybe, if she could ride to town for help. No. It would be too late then. There would be no chance of finding Stan. Tears grew in her throat which could not reach her eyes or create a single sob.

CAME dawn and Lorna still sat at a window, looking at the empty yard. She had taken off the blue organdy and put on riding clothes, fastened a loaded, holstered revolver at her waist. Then there was nothing to be done except try to hold back the constantly rising terror. A pony entered the yard at a walk and she went out to the porch to see her father turning toward the corrals.

"Wait." She plunged after him. "Last night—"

"We not only didn't catch up with the raiders. We didn't find any sign of them," he said wearily.

"I want you to find Stan Blackwell," she said, her voice lifting into shrill demand. "Get some of the men to organize a searching party. Last night he was taken out of the Broken Peak ranch at gun point—"

"Oh, no, he wasn't." Frank Hudson cut her off harshly. "He was in the town of Pine Point holding up a bank."

The girl's lips twisted shapelessly.

"While everyone was hunting the rustlers, the State Growers Bank was held up. A deputy sheriff was shot and he isn't expected to live. He's given a description of the man who pulled the holdup and shot him. It fits Stan Blackwell."

"I don't believe it! He was with me until someone forced him away. I saw!"

"Stop telling such crazy stories. The deputy's identification is enough but there's something else. His hat band—that fancy metal hat band he always wears—was found outside the bank."

"He couldn't have been there."

"I don't want to talk about it. As soon as I've put up my pony I'm going to bed."

When he came back from the corral, closed the door behind him, Lorna brought

out her own mount, her hands fumbling as they struggled with the saddle.

"The answer is at the Broken Peak," she told herself. *"It has to be, and I'm going there to find it."*

She traveled at a gallop. When she got to the Broken Peak, there was no sound from the house. It seemed completely, almost breathlessly, still. Lorna lifted her hand to knock but instead tried the door. It opened and she stepped into the hall, paused and looked toward the big living room littered with party debris. Someone was slumped down in a chair.

She approached noiselessly. But her voice went high as she cried: "Tim. I didn't think there was anyone here."

"Lorna, I'm sorry. Wish I'd gotten back earlier. It was a tough night."

"Tim, after you and the others left last night, Stan Blackwell returned here to the house. Two armed men took him away."

Whelen pulled himself to his feet. "I don't know what you're talking about. Blackwell robbed the bank and everybody on the range is looking for him, hoping to hang him."

"Listen, Tim, and try to understand. I'm telling you exactly what happened—"

"Sure she is, Whelen." Stan's voice was a dark whip striking from the doorway.

He stepped into the living room, followed by a middle-aged man in a black, formal-looking suit. "You'd better explain that the rustlers were taking your orders, the gunnies who showed up last night were working for you, too. They rushed me down the back way. But Ho Lee happened to be there with a gun. He took me away from them. After that I met Mr. Hargrave of Jedson and Hargrave, Howard Bailey's lawyers. Mr. Hargrave was waiting for me at High Ridge, a town ten miles East of Pine Point.

"What's this all about?" Tim Whelen's body seemed to grow taller and thinner as he faced Blackwell. "Mr. Hargrave, maybe you'd better explain."

"He will, later. I'll do the talking now. When Jedson and Hargrave started looking for me, after my father died, they first contacted you, thinking you might know of my whereabouts. What you did was get a buddy of yours to say I'd been killed a year before my father died—"

"Your father?"

He nodded and his blue glance found her eyes. "I left home years ago. Dad and I couldn't get along. When I heard of his death I also learned that the only heir was supposed to be Whelen. I decided to change my name while I looked things over. Then I gave Hargraves proof of my identity and waited to see what Whelen would do. I found out. He figured out a way to have me shot as an outlaw."

Lorna saw a flicker of movement in Whelen. His hand was already on his gun, whipping it up. Her own hand flashed and her revolver spat less than a second before Whelen's exploded. The gun clattered against the floor. As Tim Whelen jerked around to stare at her, the shoulder of his shirt turned red. "You shot me!"

"I had to. But you're not badly hurt."

Stan chuckled and, putting an arm around her, drew her tightly against him. "Thanks again," he said. "It'll be convenient to have such a top marksman for a wife."

"Do you want me for a wife? Even though I was becoming interested in Tim—"

"You were trying to become interested. But you wouldn't have married him under any circumstances. I know that and I'll always know it, Lorna."

His kiss held the smell of the sun and the scent of light-drenched, warm gold.

THE END

The winning last line of the February PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

Beauty and beast are a breath-taking pair,
Who out-bulldog any Romeo in sight.
So if you're a-courtin', cowboy, beware—
That a kiss doesn't cost you a bulldog's bite!

was won by Mr. Theofil J. Cuhel, Chisago City, Minnesota.

Pin-Up Girl

Our lassoin' lovely is hitting the trail,
And the cowboys are fit to be tied.
Although she'll round up some
maverick male—

. . . . . .

To finish the limerick in this May contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this May contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on April 29th, 1949. The judges' decision will be final. See opposite page for winner of February contest.

LOVE MY HOSS—LOVE ME!

That's the way it was with scrappy Sally—who couldn't get an hombre . . . unless she swapped a horse.

IF ONE more man crossed the threshold of Ma Hart's Elite Boarding House, Sally Hart swore she would scream—or drop dead. For the past couple of weeks people had been drifting into town from all directions. They came up from the Cherokee Strip which was to be opened for settlement on the Sixteenth of September. They came over from Colorado, down from Missouri, up from Arkansas, and each and every one, Sally feared, had stopped at the Elite to ask for a room.

Already they were sleeping three shifts in the beds—and you would stumble over them snoozing in the hallways. The dining room was a steady, endless clatter, except for the too-frequent occasions when food ran short. Now the water supply had given out—and a man, politely removing his hat as he stepped through the doorway, smiled upon Sally Hart. Sally screamed.

"Dan Craig!"

"Hi, Sal," Craig said genially. He was a big man, lean as a mountain lion and strong as an ox. His yellow hair was crisp and two months long. But he had shaved this morning before coming into town and, as far as Sally was concerned, just looking at him made her weak in the knees. "I was wondering—"

He glanced around. Every chair in the sitting room was occupied by a snoring man. Protruding over the top step of the stairs to the upper floor hallway was a pair of boots.

"Don't say it!" Sally said.

Craig got the point and laughed. "Should have guessed something like this would happen with the opening of the Strip. Should have sent in to reserve my old room."

"You sure should," Sally said. "There's twelve gentlemen from Missouri using that room. In three shifts. Two in the bed, two on the floor."

"I got to see that," he said.

"I'll show you."

Gingerly she led the way up the stairs, stepping carefully over men sleeping in the hallway. Dan Craig had been punching cows down in the Strip for one of the ranches that belonged to the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association. Not long ago they had been ordered to clear out all cattle to open the way for homesteaders.

It had been Craig's custom to come up to town every couple of months for a little spree, and he had always stayed at Ma Hart's. But this would be his last visit, Sally reckoned lugubriously. With the cows he had been working all back in Texas, he would not be coming up here to Kansas any more.

When they reached "his" room, she listened a moment, counted the snores, and opened the door. There were two men on the bed and three on the floor, and one of these was a stranger. Sally tapped him on the shoulder but he went on sleeping. Craig leaned down and picked him up to shake him. The man's eyes popped open.

By Art Lawson

She grabbed his yellow hair . . . to get a good grip while she kissed him.

"You didn't sign the register," Sally accused him. "Three bucks, quick."

"Didn't see no one around," the man excused himself, "so picked out a likely spot to stretch out. I'll sign the register when I go down for supper."

"Three bucks, the lady said," Craig prompted.

If the man was prepared to argue the point, one look at Craig quickly dissuaded him. Reluctantly he produced three crumpled bills. Craig let go of him, grinning.

"Fellah who pays up so promptly ought to have better accommodations," Craig observed. "Here." He rolled one of the men out of the bed onto the space on the floor where the new tenant had been sleeping. "Pleasant dreams."

Sally and Craig retreated to the hallway and closed the door. Almost immediately they heard springs creak and both broke out laughing. Craig glanced down speculatingly on the girl. Sally was an easy-going redhead with big eyes and nicely moulded figure that was distinctly outlined in her cheap calico dress. Shoes were something she never wore in the house, so the high-heeled boots of Craig made him seem even taller beside her.

In the dark hallway with the sounds of snores all around them, he bent down to stare into her greenish-blue eyes for a moment. Her heart began to throb violently.

"You forgot something," he said. "When a feller does you a favor, do you just stand in a hall and laugh?"

"No!" Her voice was small and tight. She had been waiting months for Dan Craig to break down and admit that she was more than just the half-pint daughter of a boarding-house keeper. "I—well—thanks," she said, and kissed him. She grabbed his crisp yellow hair in both her hands to get a good grip while she kissed him, and the kiss was a thorough job.

One of the men on the floor woke up while the kiss was at its height.

"Good grief," he moaned. "I oughtn'ta had that last drink."

Sally finally let go of Dan Craig. She felt weird and strange as if nothing again could ever be real. Craig remained in his bent-over posture as if he had been frozen there. Sally could not be sure that he was conscious. He took a very deep breath, exhaled it slowly, and breathed in again.

"You don't reckon there might be some more hombres who forgot to register?" Craig asked.

"Might be," Sally said hopefully. "Let's see."

But she had just put a hand on a doorknob when her mother began to shout from the sitting room.

"Four o'clock! Everybody out." The old lady had a terrific voice, and reinforced her warning with a sharp blast of a whistle. "Step lively, men."

FOR the next half hour Sally was very busy clearing the house and taking money from the men who had been waiting outside to get in. A couple of girls who planned on making the run waited on table for their meals and swept up for their share of a bed, so Sally found herself briefly with time on her hands and looked around for Dan Craig.

Dan had disappeared and, in fact, it seemed unlikely that he had been here at all. Many a night she had dreamed of kissing the cowboy, or of being kissed by him, but she had never really dreamed that it actually would happen. There were a couple of reasons why she had never believed her dreams could come true. In the first place, he had never made a move in her direction. Secondly, whenever he came to town, he always spent a good part of his spare time riding with Lolita Lavender.

Except for the fact that they were both girls and of about the same age, there was no comparison between Lolita and Sally. Whereas Sally never wore shoes if she could go without them, Lolita always did, fragile shoes made of fine leather or cloth. She wore fine silk dresses, too, that were made not to cover her up but to enhance her lush loveliness. Her hats were always plumed, and when she walked down the street with a faint sway of handsome hips, everyone knew that Lolita knew everyone was looking at her.

Bitterly, Sally guessed that she knew what had come of Dan Craig. As her mother had often said, Lolita just naturally had a talent for rounding up men. It was like Sally's talent for making apple pies. Stick to what you do best, ma said, and leave other folks alone where they're better en-

dowed than you. It was a fine theory—but unfortunately Sally had had enough apple pie.

Grim lipped, she counted the receipts for the day. At two or three bucks per man, three shifts, it looked like a fortune. In the old days they would not have earned as much in a month. Sally took out ten per cent of the take, hid the rest in the hollow skull of a longhorn steer's head mounted on the wall, and looked at her mother. Nothing upset ma. Even making a small fortune off these boomers did not put her off her even keel.

She noticed that Sally had put on her riding boots. "Where are you going?" Ma asked. "At our busiest hour, too. Git back there behind that desk."

"I'm taking Lightning for a canter," Sally said. "And you can watch the desk. We earned so much money today my share is enough to pay off the rest on that horse I bought. I aim to do it right away."

Ma scowled. "You aimin' to make the run, ain't you?"

"I'm thinking about it," Sally said.

"All that money's gone to your head," Ma said. Then she shrugged. "Okay, run along, and give Lolita my regards."

Sally ran. Lightning was a mighty fine bay horse with a jagged white break on his side where he had been scratched once on a barbed wire fence. He was still scared of wire, but of nothing else, and he could run away from anything on hoofs.

Cinching her saddle down, Sally climbed aboard. Lightning neighed with anticipation of a brisk workout. Sitting awkwardly across the saddle, and keeping to the back alley, Sally walked the horse out of town. Free of the false-fronted buildings and the milling boomers, she shifted to an astride position and gave the horse its head. He lined out straight for the Lavender ranch where he had grown up.

Sally's skirts whipped up to display white, graceful legs. Red hair snapped in the wind like a bright flag. And Sally swore she did not give a hang if Dan Craig was carrying on with Lolita. There were other men in the world.

As a matter of fact another man, at this instant, was tooling a rig down the road toward her. She recognized it in the dis-

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tance and reined in her horse to a slower trot. Too late to change her position, she settled her skirt over her knees as modestly as possible. Elmer Dwight brought his fancy rig to a halt and she stopped to pass the time of day with him.

"Evenin', Elmer. Great day."

Elmer seemed fascinated by the stretch of white between boot tops and skirt hem. Why, she could not guess. He was the proprietor of the *Royal Flush,* renamed the *Main Street Republican Club* now that there was prohibition in Kansas. If there was any truth in the stories about the goings on down there, one girl's leg was mighty small change indeed.

He finally looked at her face. He had seemed rather angry when he had stopped. Now he was figuring out something.

"I heard you bought that Lightning horse to make the run," he said.

"There's rumors flying all around," Sally laughed. "I heard you were going steady with Lolita."

"That washed-out blonde!" he said angrily. Sally's dig had been a mean one, but she felt like laughing at this man who was usually so suave. What had happened was as plain to her as the big red bluffs that formed the background to the Lavender ranch. He and Lolita had been riding out every night.

But Dan Craig was back, and Elmer had just discovered the fact. He got control of his expression. "Look—this is what I mean. I'm holding a meeting in the Republican Club tonight. Organize a townsite company. That's where the money is—not in claiming a farm. Drop around."

Sally shivered at the thought. No good woman would go into that den of iniquity. But then, there had been a time when a traveling parson with two very convincing sixshooters had held church services there. A meeting of a townsite company certainly could not be compared to the usual activities of the place, Sally decided.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Elmer got in the last lick. "Just ran across your boy friend. He's pitched a tent on Lolita's lawn. They were drinking sherry and eating cookies when I was there."

"That washed-out blond cowboy!" Sally said, and laughed. "Who gives shucks about him?"

"Lolita," Elmer said disagreeably. He looked at her again in that peculiar way as if he had never seen her before. She moved nervously in the saddle. His eyes shifted to the horse and back to her. "That's a mighty fast horse, and you don't weigh much more than a hundred pounds. You could have your pick of any quarter section in the strip."

She knew that, and now she got the point of his conversation.

"You mean you want me to stake the site for your town?"

"Why not?" he asked. "I got the exact place picked out. They're going to build a railroad through it. It'll be a big city some day." His eyes gleamed with the plans. "For staking it for the company you'll get the best lots in town. Can build a hotel. For thinking up the idea—I'll get the next best. You and I'll really get somewhere."

It was a challenge. "I'll be at the meeting," she promised.

HALF-A-DOZEN Flying U cowboys were loafing on the spacious porch of Lolita Lavender's house. Lolita's father had made his money in the days of the cattle drives from Texas. He had a store in town and traded in steers on the side, and while Lolita was still a little girl he had built this mansion for her. Lolita's mother had died when the girl was only a child and Lolita had been thoroughly spoiled by her father. Whatever Lolita wanted her father gave her—or Lolita went out and got it.

Lolita had a pretty good collection of men here on the porch, but they were all old friends of Sally Hart even if they were admirers of the flashy blond. When the redhead rode up, all six hopped out of their chairs to help her from the horse.

"What are you boys doing up here?" she asked, laughing. "You're not going to become grangers?"

"Didn't Dan tell you?" one answered. Suddenly they were secretive. "Just hanging around," he went on. "Come up to see the excitement."

Sally let it ride. She knew that they were being evasive, but she had learned around her mother's boarding house that all she had to do was keep her ears open

and sooner or later she would hear everything.

Attracted by the commotion, Lolita ran out to the porch. Trailing her was Dan Craig. Lolita was prettier than ever. She wore a yellow silk dress that moulded her rounded figure in exciting curves, and her golden hair was done in the new fashion with a fillet at each side of a material that matched her eyes, and corkscrew curls spilling down in back to her bare shoulders.

Sally felt like a drab little mouse in the light shed by Lolita. Ma had been right. In man-catching you just could not compete with that luscious blonde. No wonder Dan had run right out here.

Lolita had a big greeting for Sally. She threw her arms around Sally's neck and kissed her, a very astonishing and unusual salutation for Lolita to bestow on the smaller girl. Lolita's expensive perfume was strangely heady.

"You're just in time for supper," Lolita cried. "And we're having a party. Come on in."

Bewildered, Sally followed. The long mahogany table in the great living room was set with silver and crystal. The cowboys filed in awkwardly. The girls sat at either end of the table with the men ranged down the sides, afraid of the white linen and gleaming profusion of crystal. Usually a bowie knife sufficed them for eating and a sleeve was what they used for a napkin.

Only Lolita was at ease. When everybody was settled she asked Dan to say grace and he stumbled awkwardly over the words.

Though the service was fancy, the food was lusty—steaks two inches thick, mashed potatoes in huge bowls, baked beans, coffee and rolls. There was beer, too, and ale, and afterwards the butler brought brandy for the embarrassed cowboys into the big parlor.

Through it all, Lolita carried the conversation. The cowboys were too busy eating to talk, and Sally was too stunned. While the men were drinking brandy out of tiny glasses that they seemed afraid would break, Lolita Lavender managed to corner Sally.

"You're lovely tonight," Lolita said. "Simply gorgeous, Sally. I think you're prettier every day. Like a girl who's in love."

Sally blushed. Lolita did not mean a word of it. The praise was just a build up, an approach to the reason why Lolita had greeted her so warmly.

"Why," Sally denied, "I feel like an old hag."

"Not you," Lolita insisted. Her wide brown eyes darkened, and her voice lowered. "I was wondering, Sally. You don't really need Lightning. Would you sell him back to me?"

So that was it! "But I don't—" Sally said.

Quickly Lolita cut in. "And besides you haven't finished paying for him."

Sally remembered her purpose in coming out here and reached into her bodice for the money she had brought.

"So silly of me," she said. "Here, Lolita. Here's the rest of the money."

Lolita had a poker face. She accepted

the cash without counting it. Dan had come over to join the girls and Lolita spoke to him.

"She wants to keep Lightning, Dan." Sweetly to Sally, she added: "I'd swap you any other horse I have, Sally. And you really don't need so fast a horse as Lightning."

"But I do," Sallly insisted. "You see, I'm going to make the run."

"Then, that's that." Dan spoke up. "I got a spot picked down on Sandy Creek for a horse ranch and I figured with Lightning I could get there ahead of anybody."

Lolita had a bright idea. "Sally doesn't have any particular claim picked out, Dan. Maybe she'll lend you Lightning. I'll give her Blue Streak."

The casual way in which these people assumed she did not amount to anything angered Sally.

"But I do have a claim picked out!" Sally said. "I'm going in with Elmer on a townsite company, and I'm the one who's scheduled to stake the claim. Thanks for the vittles. Good night."

Sally stalked out of there. She found her horse, threw a leg over the saddle, and spurred to town.

THOUGH Dan Craig tried to catch her before she reached town, Sally easily out-distanced him. Elmer Dwight was waiting for her at the boarding house. "Was wondering what had happened to you," he said, worried. "Was talking to your ma. She's all for this townsite."

Sally was all for it, too, now, but for different reasons.

"I'm sure a popular girl," she said. "Everybody simply loves my horse." Rather bitterly she added: "Dan Craig wanted me to make the run for him. Lolita wanted me to sell Lightning back to her. Everybody wants my horse."

They were in the boarding house kitchen, quiet now after the evening rush. Elmer caught the bitterness in her voice. He glanced over at the clock on the wall, then crossed the room and put his hands on Sally's shoulders. His usually evasive eyes were steady and his expression was one of deep understanding.

"It's pretty near time for the meeting," he said. "But before we go over, I want you to know one thing. When we get our town built, I'm going to ask your ma for permission to come to see you steady."

"And my horse?" she jibed.

"No—you! I've just been a little blind, I guess. The grass in the next field is greener. You know how it goes. But from now on I'm grazing in the lot next to home."

Sally felt as if he was talking around the bush, and she prodded him.

"Just what do you mean?"

"This!" he said.

His strong, slender gambler's fingers put a quick pain in her shoulders. Then he drew her close, and his hands moved down onto her back. He did not hurry this embrace. A man who knew what he was doing and knew how to do it, Elmer put her to him slowly. He waited until her head fell back and her eyes closed and he knew that she could not bear to wait any longer.

When he kissed her, her heart leaped and her breath came short and sharp, and her body was throbbingly snug against him. She had a queer feeling of being disassociated from the embrace. It was more like dream than fact. It was as if Elmer Dwight was any man kissing her—not someone in particular.

When she put him away, her lips were cold and her heart dead. But he did not notice this.

"Down in Dwight City you and I'll become acquainted," he said hopefully. "Really acquainted."

So he was naming the townsite after himself, Sally thought. He had everything figured out his way.

"We sure will," she agreed without enthusiasm. "Well, we better get to that meeting."

She turned away. Dan Craig was standing in the kitchen door. His face was a mask.

"She's a damned good kisser, ain't she, Elmer?"

"You had your chance," Elmer said sharply.

"And I took it," Dan said, "and I liked it."

"Stop it!" Sally shouted.

But Dan could not be halted. "Lot

cuddlier than Lolita, ain't she?" he asked.

They were ready to kill. Dan was ready with his fists, and Elmer with the derringer he always kept handy in a spring holster. Sally kept them apart.

"I wouldn't know about Lolita," Elmer denied. His voice was flat and deadly. With what seemed a great effort he took Sally's arm. "We'll be late for that meeting."

"No more grazing in the lot next to home," Dan taunted. "And such a pretty hayfield, too."

Sally's ears burned. She thought they would never cool off. Dan had been there in that doorway all the time. Sally took the affair in her hands. With Dan blocking the front way, she shoved Elmer out the back.

"Some day I'll kill him," Elmer swore.

"You do and you'll have to answer me," Sally said.

"You're not still in love with him?" Elmer asked incredulously.

"I hate him," Sally insisted. "But if you figure on courting me, you better not come around with blood on your hands."

Dan Craig came to the meeting with his contingent of Flying U cowboys, sprinkled them liberally through the big room that was Elmer Dwight's honkatonk. Very few women were there, only four or five that Sally could spot, and all of them hard looking.

Elmer gave everyone a drink on the house and when that was downed called the meeting to order. So far, everything was quiet. Elmer started to talk but a cowboy broke in. "We all come for a drink. I'll take mine straight."

"This meeting will come to order," Elmer shouted and banged on the bar. "Any more interruptions—"

"That's right, boys," another Flying U cowboy shouted. "Keep quiet and let the little feller talk. All he wants to say is he's figuring on giving us another snort. So lissen to him, and shut up."

"That's right," a third cowboy agreed.

ELMER was smouldering. Sally had been outraged at the first interruption, but when she caught Dan's troubled glance on her, she became amused. Just because these two men wanted her horse, they were willing to tear each other apart. Sally had only one regret: That Lolita was not present. A hush had fallen over the gathering.

"Thank you," Elmer said to the cowboy who had suggested quiet. "But I've got a little more to say, mister. You'll all get the free drink, but—"

"Hooray!" the cowboys shouted. "Generous hombre. Our pal."

They pushed through the solidly packed crowd. Others joined them. The place was a pandemonium. Against the far wall near the exit door Dan Craig looked on with satisfaction while the mob milled and Elmer pounded on the bar. A fistfight started in one corner of the saloon but did not progress very well.

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In despair, Elmer got down from the keg behind the bar. A couple of cowboys gave the angry storekeeper the bum's rush and Elmer reached for the sawed-off ten-gauge shotgun that he kept behind the bar. Sally Hart quickly knocked it out of his hand.

"You fool!" she shouted, and jumped up on the keg Elmer had hurriedly abandoned.

"Pipe down!" she hollered.

The milling mob quieted. The pair of cowboys who had thrown out the storekeeper came back rubbing their hands and looking for more trouble.

"You two pipe down, too!" Sally shouted at them. They subsided promptly since they had not been coached on what to do in such an emergency. Sally pinned Dan Craig against the wall with her fierce expression. "You, Dan Craig, you ought to be ashamed of yourself acting like a little spoiled brat."

Dan said with a great show of innocence: "What did I do? I didn't say anything."

"Your cowboys did," she accused him pointedly.

"They aren't my cowboys," he insisted. "They aren't anybody's cowboys. We all quit the Flying U so we could stake out homesteads and settle down to farming. We just came over here tonight for a quiet drink. If you want us to shut up—tell Elmer to shut up, too."

The crowd was ready to blow its top. Sally had to think fast before rioting broke out fresh. While she had the chance she shouted:

"For president of this townsite company, I nominate Dan Craig."

The Flying U cowboys seconded the nomination with one concerted roar, and before Dan knew what had happened they had installed him on the keg behind the bar.

Dan cleared his throat and looked about him.

"There'll be a drink on the house," he said.

Sally felt as if she was going to bust at the seams. Between Dan and Elmer, she was like a bit of metal drawn by two powerful magnets. Any second one of them would snatch her from the other. Meanwhile the mob was crowding the bar. Elmer gave up trying to serve the men. He lined up bottles on the bar and let the excited, rowdy customers help themselves to their drinks.

Dan, the new president of the townsite company, climbed down from the keg. He glared over Sally's head at Elmer. Elmer glared back. Sally borrowed a silver dollar from the till and tossed it high, spinning. When it landed on the floor she quickly put a foot on it.

"Okay," she said. "You two hombres want my horse. I don't give a hang who gets it. Call the toss and you can have him."

The gambling man, who had gotten a glimpse of the coin when it fell, answered quickly:

"Heads!"

While Sally's foot was still on the dollar, Dan shrugged.

"The devil with your horse," he said. "I don't want the horse. All I wanted was to marry you. And now the devil with you, too."

He swung away and nearly stumbled over the keg on which he had been standing a moment before. Sally could only stare for a moment—then she squealed and went after him. He had gotten out into the dark alley behind the Main Street Republican Club before she caught him. With her arms tight around him she cried:

"You big dope. You big, silly dope. If you only wanted to marry me, why'd you go out to Lolita's?"

Dan frowned angrily. "Because I wanted that Lightning horse. I wanted him so I'd be sure to get the little place I picked out on Sandy Creek. And I figured when I got a shack built, I could come back and fetch you."

She melted against him, but he kept his hands stiffly at his side. Then his eyes softened.

"My turn to kiss you," he said. "Then I'll be pulling out—back to the Flying U—and Elmer can have you."

She hardly heard him. Her arms were around his neck. He kissed her and it set her on fire. She kissed back.

"Your turn again!" she whispered. "It'll always be your turn."

DESPERADO!

Bill liked the sheriff's daughter,
She liked him too, it seemed.
The sheriff was against it,
Heading off all they schemed.
Bill couldn't get to see her,
Either by night or day.
The sheriff would forbid it,
And put things in the way.

Bill tried to get arrested,
So he would be in jail,
And see the girl, and plan things;
But he would always fail.
He rattled off confessions
That ought to hang a man;
The sheriff saw his motive,
And just ignored the plan.

At last in desperation,
Seeing each scheme would slip,
Old Bill kidnapped the sheriff,
And took a wedding trip.
The sheriff raved and threatened;
The girl said, "Easy, Paw.
Remember the kidnapper
Is now your son-in-law."

By Clarence Edwin Flynn

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

"The difference between the optimist and pessimist is droll;
The optimist the doughnut sees, the pessimist the hole."

The doughnut is being honored this month, especially throughout the week of April 25th through April 30th: *National Donut Week.* These little cakes have come a long way since Mrs. Anna Joralemon opened the first doughnut shop in New York City, in 1673. This was not only the first of its kind, but was one of the first of women's business ventures.

Mrs. Joralemon was the mark for some criticism, as well as the object of humorous remarks—since history records that her weight was well above two hundred pounds. This may or may not have spoken well for her wares.

There are numerous explanations to account for the hole in the center. One version is that originally a nut was placed in the middle of the cake. Since this caused a heavy center, the nut was later removed to insure lightness. Some declare that when a Pilgrim housewife was making fried cakes, an Indian shot an arrow through the window, piercing the center of the ball of dough.

Perhaps the most widely believed is the story regarding Captain Hanson Gregory, a state of Maine mariner. He supplied hearty food for his men on watch, their favorite fare being fried cakes. While steering the ship both hands were required to hold the wheel steady and there was no place to lay the fried cake. This started the habit of ramming the soft cake over a wheel spoke. Noting this, the practical minded captain ordered his cook to in the future make the cakes with a hole in the center.

Not every cake fried in hot fat is a doughnut. The dough must be

soft and raised with either yeast, baking powder or a mixture of soda and cream of tartar for a lightener.

The oldest recipe was in use in Michigan in 1880, brought there reputedly from Rhode Island. This calls for 2 eggs lightly beaten and blended with 1 cup of sugar to which has been added a teaspoon of ground nutmeg. Sift 1½ teaspoons of baking powder into 4 cups of flour. Then stir ½ teaspoon of soda into 1 cup of buttermilk and add alternately with the flour to the eggs and sugar. Lastly mix in 4 tablespoons of melted butter. A soft dough should have been formed. Roll ½ inch thick on a floured board and cut with doughnut cutter. Fry in deep fat until brown, about 3 minutes.

A modern version of this recipe is called—

SPICED SUGAR DOUGHNUTS

Cream 3 tablespoons of shortening with 1 cup of sugar. Beat and add 2 eggs. Sift together 4½ cups of flour, 4 teaspoons of baking powder, 1 teaspoon of salt and 1 of nutmeg. Add to the creamed mixture alternately, with 1 cup of milk. Roll ½ inch thick on floured board, cut with doughnut cutter and fry in deep fat, temperature of about 375 degrees F. Turn the cakes only once, frying about 3 minutes when they should be a rich, golden brown. Drain on absorbent paper. Mix ¾ of a cup of sugar with 2 tablespoons of cinnamon and shake this with the warm doughnuts in a paper bag.

DOUGHNUT LINKS

To make these, follow the above recipe for spiced sugar doughnuts, substituting for the nutmeg, ¾ of a teaspoon of cinnamon. Divide dough in half. Melt 1 square (1 oz.) of unsweetened chocolate over hot water adding 2 tablespoons of milk. Add to ½ dough. Roll out both halves of the dough on floured board, ½ inch. Cut with doughnut cutter. Then cut through the chocolate flavored doughnuts, link through plain ones, seal and fry in the deep fat. This recipe will make twelve pairs. A variation of the chocolate flavor is to blend with half the dough the grated rind of 2 oranges.

DESSERT DOUGHNUTS

Sift together 3 times 2½ cups of flour with 2 teaspoons of baking powder, ½ teaspoon of salt and ½ teaspoon of nutmeg. Beat thoroughly 2 eggs or 4 egg yolks. Should be very light and thick. Add ½ cup of sugar and continue beating until mixture is fluffy. Add the flour alternately with ½ cup of heavy cream, beating until smooth after each addition. Turn out on floured board and knead for 30 seconds. Roll ¼ inch thick, cut with a 1¾ inch cutter and fry in deep fat until rich, golden brown, turning frequently. Drain on unglazed paper. Cool and sprinkle with confectioner's sugar.

Perhaps you like frosted doughnuts. Here are a few icings from which to choose:

CONFECTIONER'S GLAZE

Blend together 1 cup of confectioner's sugar with two tablespoons of water. Add ½ teaspoon of vanilla extract and spread on warm doughnuts.

GOLD FROSTING

Add 1 tablespoon of lemon juice to 2 unbeaten egg yolks, then enough confectioner's sugar to form a mixture of the right consistency to spread on the warm doughnuts.

QUICK FUDGE FROSTING

Place 3 squares of unsweetened chocolate in a saucepan with 2 tablespoons of butter, 12 marshmallows that have been cut into pieces, ¼ cup of water and a dash of salt. Stir over a low flame until the chocolate and marshmallows are blended. Remove from the fire and add 2 cups of sifted confectioner's sugar and 1 teaspoon of vanilla, beating until the mixture will spread nicely.

MAPLE FROSTING

Cream together ¼ cup of butter or margarine with 2 cups of sifted confectioner's sugar. Add sufficient milk to make the mixture the proper consistency to spread, which should be about 3 tablespoons. Add lastly a few grains of salt and ½ teaspoon of maple flavoring. There are many methods of serving doughnuts, both at simple home meals and for festive occasions.

DOUGHNUT TIPSY SQUIRE

Soak 1 tablespoon of unflavored gelatine in cold water for 5 minutes. Heat 2 cups of light cream nearly to boiling. Add to the softened gelatine and ½ cup of sugar, stirring until dissolved. Cool, then add ½ teaspoon of almond flavoring. Chill until the mixture is syrupy. Meantime split the doughnuts and place a half, the cut side up, in each of 8 lightly buttered custard cups. Pour a small quantity of sherry or port wine on each, using ½ cup in all. Beat the gelatine mixture until fluffy, filling the molds half full. Place the remaining doughnut half on top, cut side down. Pour wine over the added halves, again using ½ cup. Chill from 2 to 3 hours. Unmold and garnish with almonds.

DOUGHNUT PEANUT TREATS

Melt over hot water 1 package of semi-sweet chocolate bits. Chop finely 1 cup of peanuts. This is sufficient for 12 doughnuts. Each is dipped half into the melted chocolate, then into the peanuts.

TOP HAT DOUGHNUTS

Beat 4 egg whites stiff but not dry. Then beat in ½ cup of marshmallow whip. Fold in one 7 oz. package of chocolate bits, swirl the mixture on doughnuts and brown in a hot oven 3 to 5 minutes. This recipe also will top a dozen doughnuts.

For a tempting breakfast dish, try splitting doughnuts, toasting them and serving with applebutter.

And they can be handsomely dressed up to go into a lunch box. Mix half a cupful of peanut butter with a tablespoon of steamed raisins. Cut doughnuts crosswise and put the halves together sandwich fashion with the peanut mixture.

DOUGHNUT COFFEE CUSTARD

Melt 2 tablespoons of butter or margarine. Beat 3 eggs and add to them the melted margarine. Scald 2 cups of milk and add to 2 cups of strong coffee, with ⅓ cup of sugar, ¼ teaspoon each of salt and nutmeg and 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract. Blend the two mixtures and when the sugar has dissolved, pour custard into casserole, slice 4 doughnuts crosswise and float on the mixture cut side down. Set in pan of hot water and bake in a moderate oven for 1 hour, or until an inserted knife comes out clean.

Having doughnuts on hand has often proved the life saver for a hostess suddenly obliged to offer refreshments. A shallow bowl may be set in a large tray and surrounded with small dishes containing peanut butter, jam or marmalade, nuts, dried fruit and cottage cheese. Let the guests make their own sandwiches and serve hot coffee to drink with them. Or you can hastily make very tempting sandwiches with a mixture of equal parts of marmalade and cooked prunes that have been pitted and chopped.

DOUGHNUTS MARGUERITE

Arrange a frill of meringue on each doughnut and place under a broiler fire until a golden brown. Fill the centers with lemon pudding. You could give a doughnut party, always fun-producing and popular. There are all sorts of games. You might try *doughnuts on a string.* Hang them with rubber bands from a chandelier or some central contrivance around which a number of contestants may gather simultaneously. Hands behind backs, they try to eat the doughnuts. First to finish his and whistle the first two lines of a song wins. Ask for volunteers for a *doughnut derby.* When you have enough volunteers to start, divide them into teams of two. Line the first on either side of a long table that has been covered with a clean, white cloth. Place a doughnut in front of each. At the sound of the starting whistle each contestant must push his along the table with his nose. If the doughnut falls to the floor, the contestant loses the race. First to reach the other end of the table is the winner.

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BERRY JUMBLE

Wash, hull and cut in ½ a quart of strawberries. Add ¼ cup water and 1 cup sugar. Place in a large saucepan and heat to the boiling point. In the meantime, sift together 1 cup flour, 1/3 cup sugar, 1 teaspoon baking powder and a pinch of salt. Cut in 2 tablespoons shortening and add 1/3 cup milk or water. Mix well and drop by tablespoons on the berry mixture. Cover tightly and cook for 20 minutes, slowly, and without removing the cover. Red raspberries may be substituted for the strawberries, but in that case use a little more water as the raspberries are a less juicy fruit.

CARROT MARMALADE

Scrape 5 carrots and cut finely. Cook until tender in a small amount of water. Add 3 oranges which have been sliced thinly, with the juice and the rind of 1 lemon. Add 2/3 of a cup of sugar for each cup of the mixture. Cook slowly a few minutes, until thickened.

SPICED CRANBERRIES

The amount given makes about five pint jars. Wash and pick over 5 pounds of cranberries. Chop small or put through a food chopper. Put in a stewing kettle with 4½ cups of tightly packed brown sugar. 1½ cups of vinegar and 2½ cups of water. Add 2 tablespoons each of ground allspice and cinnamon and 1 tablespoon of ground cloves. Bring to a boil and continue boiling, stirring frequently, until the mixture thickens. Pour into clean, hot jars and seal at once. These are good with poultry and roasts, especially pork.

PORK CHOPS WITH CRANBERRIES

Brown 6 chops quickly on both sides and sprinkle with salt. Place 3 chops in the bottom of a baking dish. Have ready a mixture of 4 cups of ground cranberries, ¾ cup of honey and ½ teaspoon of ground cloves. Cover the 3 chops with half of this, add remaining chops, then cover with remaining half of the cranberry mixture. Cover and bake in a moderate oven about ½ hour.

WINE AND CAKE PUDDING

Fill an earthenware dish about ½ full of pieces of sponge cake, lady-fingers or any similar cake. Add a few macaroons. To 1 pint of heated wine, add a teaspoonful of cornstarch dissolved in water, 3 egg yolks and 3 heaping teaspoons of sugar. Stir the mixture thoroughly and pour over the cake. When cooled, cover with the whites of 3 eggs stiffly beaten. Spread chopped nuts over the top and brown in the oven. An added touch is to include with the nuts a tablespoon of finely chopped candied cherries, or 1 tablespoon of chopped, candied orange peel, or a tablespoon of chopped preserved ginger. Serve the pudding cold.

PRAIRIE PRISONER OF LOVE ♥ ♥ ♥

By Harriet A. Bradfield

I was green and awkward
And all too citified,
But I loved Western prairies—
And a certain cowboy guide.

He struggled hard to teach me
The ways of the Wild West,
And I was very eager
To try all he'd suggest.

I fell from bucking horses,
Was tripped by my own rope.
I caught him laughing at me,
And still I kept up hope.

I might fail as his pupil,
But I taught him *some things!*
I steered him into romance
By twisting his heart-strings.

I bewitched him in the moonlight
Which silvered all the prairie,
And I coaxed him with my kisses
Into a mood to marry!

WHAT EVERY SAGE HEN KNOWS

So-o the cuddly carpenter was no lady—
but she'd bet a shingle
rancher Randy would kiss her.

♥ ♥ ♥

Delightful Novelette of a Range Romance

By Shane Darcy

CHAPTER ONE

Save a Dance for Me

TONY HANDLER had it coming to her, everybody said. Every persnipity neighbor for miles around nodded her housewifely head knowingly and shrugged her nosy shoulders and agreed that it served Tony right. Every unmarried girl in Shanks-spring Valley who had ever laid envious eyes on Tony gleefully heard and repeated the news of tomboy Tony's come-uppance.

Only the cowpokes whose eyes had lingered appreciatively on Tony Handler's firmly moulded young body, with its beautifully accented curves, appareled though they usually were in patched levis, faded shirt and scuffed boots; and who

Impulsively Tony wound her arms closer around his neck . . . forgetting the hammer in her hand.

had licked their lips while they thought of her own apple-red, ripe mouth—only they frowned when they heard that she was jilted.

Despite the self-satisfied smugness of their womenfolk, the cowpokes muttered that if that young buckaroo Randy Barker had really decided not to marry Tony, it was his loss. It would be because he didn't know a real live and luscious gal when he saw one.

Surprising how quickly everybody heard about it—everybody except Tony. For, all the while her gossipity neighbors were hooting the astonishing news up and down Shanks-spring Valley, unsuspecting Tony Handler was blissfully repairing neighbor Clem Whipple's shakey rocker.

Comfortably perched beside the white railing of her front porch, one long, levis-clad leg stretched outward, the other tucked comfortably beneath her, Tony rhythmically pounded the wooden slats into place. From her father Tony had learned to love tools, and it had come in right handy ever since she'd had to shift for herself.

True, the prim and proper womenfolk of Shanks-spring Valley were scandalized by the very idea of a lady carpenter. But that didn't stop their husbands from supplying Tony with enough carpentry jobs to pay for her vittles.

Now Tony had a half-a-dozen nails more to hammer in before the rocker would be safe for old-timer Whipple to nap in, when a familiar whistle announced Randy's arrival. Tony shifted her position to be able to watch the tawny-haired young rancher as he rode up to her porch.

Tall and lean in the saddle, Randy galloped up close, calling, "Tony, I have a surprise for you."

Unaccountably, her heart quickened a beat. Not saying anything, just sitting there with her brown braids bobbing up and down, she waited for Randy to explain. Here it was spring, and real time for Randy to be surprising her with some plumb dazzling hitchin' news.

But instead of saying any more, he pulled his sorrel up short, skedaddled off it before the horse came to a full stop, ran the yards to Tony in a hop, skip and jump, and picked her up. Holding her around the waist like a little girl, he whirled her into the air and spun her around. Tony, still holding onto the hammer, obligingly wrapped her warm arms around his neck.

"Tony, my pal," Randy chanted gayly, "I've just done it. I've just done it." He danced around a wide circle and gave her an extra squeeee. That hug had come just in time, Tony decided, because she was about to float away, she was so buoyant with anticipation.

And then the rest of Randy's words drifted into her ears. "Tony," he had actually said, "I've just bought the pasture land out Linden way."

Randy was cuddling her so tightly she could just manage to look up into his deep blue eyes and see the sparkling glow there. Impulsively, she wound her arms closer around Randy's broad shoulders . . . forgetting the hammer in her hand.

He grinned down at her, his eyes caressing her lovely face. Then, gently, he tilted her head upward. His lips met hers, breathed tenderly on the softness of them, and then, as she clung more tightly to him, crushingly kissed her. This was the first time Randy had ever kissed her, and so Tony wasn't prepared for the colored rockets that spun around and around her throbbing head, making her ecstatic heart leap dizzily to meet the rockets. Now they were flaming headily, and then they were disappearing and she was becoming aware of the world around her again, but still she couldn't tear her lips away from the sweet pressure of his.

Reluctantly, she tried to pull away.

"No," he murmured. "Not yet. I can't let you go."

Her face beaming, with a tremendous sigh she relaxed in his arms. One of her hands reached up to fondle Randy's hair; the other patted his shoulder—and then Randy yelped in pain as the forgotten hammer dropped, landing on his foot.

His arms flew open, spilling Tony off balance and onto the ground, while he hopped about on his other foot. Humbled, Tony sat where she had fallen.

SLOWLY she lifted tearful eyes. Randolph Barker was becoming a rancher of means in the valley. And men of means needed wives who were dignified and proper. He would

never think she was dignified and proper while she sat around in old levis, banging nails into chairs and dropping hammers on the feet of the buckaroo she adored and who had just kissed her for the very first wonderful time.

But now Randy was ruefully looking down at her, shaking his head sadly, saying: "It's no use, Tony. You're just not like other girls—and I guess you'll never be.

"Of course," he continued, his voice regaining its teasing note, "you've lost your spindle-legged kid ways. Even in that outfit, you look—uh—more like a honkatonk honey than Rosabelle Witherspoon. Don't flash those lovely blue eyes at me like that, Tony."

"You're just joking," she accused. "You don't mean a word of what you say."

"Oh, yes I do. Tony, how can I talk when your hair ripples so with light, it just blinds me?" he asked. She stiffened her shoulders and clenched her fists, sure that he was joshing her now to cover his own discomfort. "You're the prettiest little thing I've ever met up with, and it sure is pleasurable to see you after lookin' at bowlegged dumb critters all week," he continued. "Just because you strut around in pants, like everybody says, instead of—"

Now she was certain. He was just repeating the scoldings all the neighbors always gave her.

"You want me to preen and primp myself, to dress in ruffles, that's it!" she shouted defiantly at him. "You think I'm a disgrace to Shanks-spring Valley, don't you?"

"Wait a minute," Randy said.

"No," she yelled at the top of her lungs. "Just because I can knock a nail in faster and straighter than most any galoot around these parts—"

"There's one thing you don't understand," Randy interrupted gently.

"That I'm not dignified enough," Tony said, shouting louder so that she wouldn't bawl.

Spacing his words evenly, Randy said sternly, "Cut it."

With her mouth still open, Tony stopped talking.

"So that's what's eatin' you, is it?" he said. Then, slowly he answered himself, "Yeah, I guess that's it. You're not dignified. Whatever *that* means." Jerking his head impatiently, he said: ""Tony, get up and look at me."

That was easy enough for Tony to do. She had been looking at this handsome rancher all her hectic life. She had toddled after him when she was just a button and his carrot-top flamed brighter than a freshly painted barn. Now, when it had calmed down to a steady tawny blaze, she always sensed a pleasant warmth catching fire within herself whenever she gazed on Randy's strong-featured, firmly-planed face.

Mischief brewed in her own sapphire-blue eyes. Tony lazily swung her body out of the sitting position into which she had dropped, carefully straightened her long slim legs, which had buckled under her when she fell. Then she arched her back with the easy grace of a cat. Devilishly, she murmured, "But, Randy, I can see you better this way."

It took Randy a full moment to hear her

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words, he was so taken up with staring at her. As she looked up at him, she saw the bemused expression leave his eyes and a curious, hard look set about his jaw.

"*Please, Lord,*" she prayed silently, "*make him love me the way I love him. Make him mean the way he kissed me.*"

Then Randy said in an odd tone of voice, "I've been teasing you, honey. Don't believe any one's scolding. The whole valley's jealous of—" He broke off, scuffed his boot against a stone as if he was carefully deciding something. "Holy smoke, Tony," he went on saying, "I *did* come here to tell you something—something more than about my buying some ol' grazin' land. It's—it's something you should have guessed, but . . . ."

Here he stopped talking, and gently raised her from the ground. But when she was standing beside him, it seemed as if he'd forgotten what he'd intended saying, distracted by gazing at her. Randy held her at arm's length while he ran a large hand through his already rumpled hair, and muttered, "A waddie's gotta make himself rock to resist you, Tony."

But why did he want to resist her, if he was going to propose?

He looked at Tony long and seriously, then said bluntly: "Tony, I mean to get married."

Just like every girl in the same situation has always said, Tony whispered, "I just never thought about it happening so soon, but it makes me so terribly happy. Randy, I'm so proud that you asked me—"

Tony's breathless rush of words stopped as she became aware that he was so wrapped up in his own engrossing thoughts that he hadn't heard a word she had said.

HEEDLESS of the breathlessness of Tony, Randy calmly said, "Yesserie, that's what I want to do. Get married. Never thought much before about bringing me home a wife—but I guess that's how it happens. Suddenly you look at someone you ain't hardly noticed before—and you feel you're in love."

"Love," Tony repeated, charmed.

Nodding his head solemnly, Randy went on. "Then she encourages you to kiss her—and you *know* you're in love."

Tony frowned silently. Why had he waited so long to tell her, if he knew right after their kiss? And, anyway, she hadn't encouraged him to kiss her then. Unless—

She dimpled. Of course. Randy was hinting that she should invite him to kiss her again—now.

Raising her tanned arms and standing on tip-toe, Tony brought them up around Randy's neck. It certainly was about time, she told herself. Here she was, almost all of seventeen years of age and still a miss.

"You don't ever have to be like other girls," Randy whispered.

"*Hah,*" Tony almost said aloud. She'd show him! She gave his broad shoulders an encouraging little hug. Randy seemed suddenly unsure of himself, holding her as if he didn't know what to do. But when she raised her face to his, he tenderly brushed her cheeks with his lips, brought them back to her mouth—and then, for the second time that morning, Tony knew what she had been missing all these seventeen years . . . .

"You sweet little kid," he said under his breath. She sneaked a look at him. He was grinning. Astonished, she heard him begin, "Maybe Rosabelle—" then, absent-mindedly trail his lips over her eyelids. He glanced covertly at her, his lips and hands unwilling to part with her.

Again he started to speak. "You're making me forget what I came to ask you. Rosabelle—"

"Rosabelle," Tony pouted. "What's that schoolmarm got to do with this?"

"Why, everything, honey," he drawled. "That's what I wanted to tell you. I've decided to marry Rosabelle."

Tony's arms went inert and she stepped away from Randy, her face pale and hurt.

"Now don't let it bother you. You know how these gossips can blow the rumble of an empty barrel into a full-fledged earthquake."

"But, but Randy," Tony managed.

"Don't look so surprised. I just told you I mean to get married. Everybody figgured I'd do my hitchin' up soon," he explained casually. "And who do you think our neighbors would want me to marry? Plump Celia Dowdson or freckle-faced Janice Crombe? Not when there's

pretty blonde Rosabelle Witherspoon."

For the first time Tony could remember its happening, Randolph Barker's deep voice grated harshly on her ears. Her own voice seemed to have disappeared into thin air, and it was all she could do to just stand there and listen to the tawny-haired rancher ramble pleasantly on, dissolving all her dreamy plans into dust.

"Yep," he said as agreeably as if he was discussing the merits of a long-eared steer with her, "everybody approves of Rosabelle."

Tony recovered her voice. "That old maid—" At the sight of Randy's thick brows darkening over his guileless blue eyes, she hastily added—"maid's envy." Randy appeared mollified, so she carefully continued, hiding her anger beneath her sweetest voice. "You mean, Randy, just because she dresses herself like a plush cayuse—"

"You sound a mite put out," Randy said.

"It's your choice," Tony said tightly.

His blue eyes, which were observing her keenly, had that lazy tantalizing look in them they always had whenever he wanted to provoke her.

"Well, Tony, you being sorta my closest pal—'though you are a girl—I thought you might like to know. 'Course I haven't told Rosabelle about wanting to get married yet. But she did say she'd go to the Saturday night shindig with me, and I think she knows what's on my mind."

"Why tell me," Tony flared out. "What do you want me to do? Propose for you?"

"Nope." He grinned maddeningly. "I think she'd sooner hear it from me. But I wanted you to excuse me from takin' *you* to the dance. I knew you would understand as soon as I explained that—"

She couldn't take any more. Clenching her fists together to keep control of herself, Tony blurted, "But that's wonderful, real wonderful, Randy, because *I* was wonderin' how to tell you—tell you that I promised to go with Timothy Ruggles."

"The banker's offspring?" For a wild moment she thought she detected a gleam in his eyes, but she couldn't be sure because he had turned his back on her and was calling to his ground-hitched sorrel. Climbing into the saddle, Randy added:

"Then everything's worked out fine." He grinned down at her. "Save a dance for me, will you, for old time's sake." And without even waiting to hear her reply, away he rode—out of her life.

Tears began to heat her eyes and she had to hunt blindly for the ill-starred hammer. She banged away so hard at Clem Whipple's rocker that she almost split it.

CHAPTER TWO

Meet a Lady

AFTER awhile, when she'd quieted down and had no tears left, Tony began to recall what she'd said—that she would go to the dance with Timothy Ruggles. Timothy, weak-kneed son of the valley's stuffy banker, usually tried to get a few dances with her every Saturday, Tony morosely reflected. He'd be tickled pink and purple to bow her around at the hoe-down.

Why, he'd probably try to lasso the sun, if that'd give her any pleasure. But the picture of skinny Timothy timidly venturing to throw a halter on the sun when he couldn't even twirl a rope over a maverick, gave her little pleasure. It was Randy she wanted to marry—but Randy was being snagged by a calf-eyed blonde who giggled and taught school.

Well, Timothy's father was also head of the school board. If that giggly blonde could teach school—so could Tony Handler.

Later, when Timothy just happened to be moseying by, there was a subtle change about Tony's house. No pliers or screwdrivers and nails cluttered up the front porch. Clem Whipple's old rocker, no longer shakey, was sitting sedately in a corner, waiting to be sent home. In a burst of resolution, Tony had not only straightened up the porch and workshed, she had also dusted the parlor.

But the biggest change was in Tony herself. Timothy Ruggles felt its force rather than saw it.

Scrawny and slightly stoop-shouldered, he stared at everything but Tony, trying to say what he came for.

"Looks—looks mighty orderly hereabouts today," he started.

Tony agreed.

That didn't seem to help much. He hemmed and hawed and started all over.

"I hear that Randy and Rosabelle—that is—aw—hell's bells!" He stopped short, astounded at himself.

"Why, Timothy! Tony was also surprised at him.

"I'm sorry, but—well—Tony, *would* you please like to go to the hoe-down with me this Saturday?" he finally managed.

Tony quickly wiped the grimace from her face and cooed, "I'd love to go to the dance with you, Timmy."

Surprised at the easy and unusual way things were going, he blurted, "Oh, that's wonderful!"

"But first, Timmy, I want you to do me a little favor." She tried fluttering her long eyelashes, and ruthlessly noted it was effective. "Tell your father to let me teach a class at school."

"Wh-what!" Timothy quavered.

She explained. "I'm not going to be wearin' levis any more. I'm going to—"

"But I like the way you look in levis," he interrupted breathlessly. "They—uh—do things for you. I mean—uh—show you off—uh—let you move about easily."

"No," Tony insisted. "I wanted to be a dignified schoolmarn, to wear hoops and ruffles like Celia Dowdson and to sit in a straight-backed chair tattin' like Janice."

Timothy said, "No."

"Yes," Tony amended.

Something akin to despair entered his eyes. Manfully he said, "No. You can't do it."

"Oh, yes I can," she decided firmly. "I'm going to be an influence in Shanksspring Valley."

"But—but why?" he asked.

She waved the question aside. No sense reminding him of Randy at this point. "I'm becomin' a teacher."

"My father won't allow it," Timothy said, glad for once of his father's reputation for sternness.

"If I can't get to be a teacher, we'll go to the dance in neighbor Wipple's buggy."

Again Timothy stalwartly said, "No," this time to both plans.

Tony ignored his refusal. Opening her eyes wide, she looked at Timothy Ruggles with a childlike innocence in her blue gaze. With a woman's unfaltering way of talking in circles and ignoring defeat though it stared her in the face, she repeated relentlessly:

"We'll drive all the way along Robber's Canyon with neighbor Whipple and his wife, back and forth." She was as casual about it as a poker player tripling his bid when he'd got a royal flush.

"No," Timothy said stubbornly, even though it took him practically no time at all to remember that Robber's Canyon was the best lollygagging road for miles about . . . and to reflect that the neighbors Whipple would be delighted to chaperon them . . . and to reason with himself that he shouldn't toy with fate. There was no sense in preventing anybody—that is, Tony—from being an influence in the valley if she was so het up about it.

Timothy had just about convinced himself that he might even be able to make his father see the practical necessity of it—since, luckily, old fuss 'n fidget schoolmarn Higgins had retired to her brother's ranch—when Tony launched her final bombshell.

"I'm going to be wearing that new style dress—without any shoulder straps," she softly whispered. In that last fluttering of her dark eyelashes, Timothy quavered, weakened and fell. . . .

That was how it came about that in three days Tony looked like a bone-seasoned hand at this fiddle-faddle foolishness of teaching a class of younkers. Sure enough, with her hair brushed into shining curls, and wearing full skirts and the new-fashion French heels, she looked like an angelic version of a schoolmarn.

But actually she found that she couldn't walk as easily in those biggity heels, and she missed her comfortable old levis, and most of all she missed being outside in this dreamily mild Indian Summer weather.

Here she was, teaching the children, when there was all that wonderful, healthy outdoors for them to romp around in. Why, it wasn't even fair to keep them locked up inside when she could just as easily— Inspiration struck her.

"Buttons," she called out to the class. The children obediently looked up from their slates.

"You must be very quiet now, for I have a wonderful treat for you. Stand up, and get into a double file. Ronny and

Orville—no palavering now. In double time, march!"

Still so very obediently, they marched, and so quietly it is doubtful if anyone heard the children as they left the little schoolhouse and walked in two lines up the leaf-blanketed hill a few feet away.

Anyone that is—except Randy. Tony had not seen the tawny-haired rancher since that terrible day when he had kissed her and then carelessly announced that their friendship would remain . . . just a friendship.

NOW she wasn't quite prepared to see him here, asitting his sorrel just back of the schoolhouse, with apparently nothing in the whole world to do except watch the workings of Tony's inspiration. *So,* she thought sorrowfully, *Randy can't keep away from that simpering Rosabelle even when she's teaching class.*

She determined not to pay any attention to him. Unfortunately, however, Randy was stock in the middle of their path, as cool as a lonesome coyote, and seemingly without any intention of moving out of their way.

"Halt," Tony ordered the tip-toeing younkers. Then, angry out of all proportion at seeing him flash that endearing lazy grin of his, she said, "Well, are you going to vamoose or aren't you?"

Mockingly, he said, "Feelin' a mite frosty today, ma'am?" His roving eyes ran circles over her parading class, and then tossed a grinning loop over Tony. "Well," he drawled, "so the prettiest gal in the whole valley wants to be an uppity school marm. Got a lassohold on all—"

"It sounds mighty windy out, doesn't it?" she cut in.

But Randy went on infuriatingly, paying her no mind at all. "On all the young bucks in Shanks-spring, and now you want to mark your brand on the real young 'uns too."

Direct measures were in order. Turning to the bewildered children, Tony said, "Ronny and Bobbie, you two lead the class up the hill. When you get to the top, just sit there and wait for me."

"Yesserie, ma'am," they whooped.

"Hold on," she called. "You've got to go quietly now." For a moment, she watched them going up in formation. Then she turned back to Randy.

"Where you going with them?" he asked. "What're you doing?"

"Going to teach them outside," she tersely replied.

"But that's never done," he said disapprovingly. "Rosabelle never even takes her young 'uns out for a stroll."

Now Tony was really indignant. *Rosabelle!* "But *I've* got some spanking-new ways of teaching, *Mister* Barker."

Randy was suspicious. "How're you going to keep them in order?"

"That won't be any problem at all. You can see they're obeyin' younkers."

He didn't look convinced. "Did you sweet-talk banker Ruggles into agreein' to this?"

Tony was struck by a spasm of doubt. "No-o," she replied weakly, but still sticking to her guns. "But it's about time. And I hope you and Rosabelle have yourselves a high-heeled time at that dance," she added irrelevantly. Then,

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abashed at having revealed her true feelings so easily, she sharply stepped around him and his horse, and walked with her head high and her back as straight as a shapely pole after the youngsters already seating themselves beneath the tree on top of the hill.

"Want some help?" Randy called after her.

"Don't try to guffaw me!" she shouted back, forgetting for a moment her dignified manner. Hastily, she resumed it. Continuing up the hill with her eyes busily guarding the children and her mind busy trying to forget about Randy, she found it hard to keep her heart from going its own heart-strong way, pounding, "Randy . . . Randy, dear . . . Randy . . ." every step up the hill.

Thus occcupied, she didn't notice the object of her inattention ride his mount to the other side of the hill, where he ground-hitched the sorrel and dashed up to the top under cover of the scattered trees. When Tony reached the towering shade maple the younkers had seated themselves beneath, she didn't know that that very same tree concealed Randy, who had already climbed up and hidden himself within its heavy, brittle cluster of autumn leaves.

A short while later, Tony had her class in perfect working order. The youngsters had taken their slates with them, and now they were holding them on their laps, scribbling away, as they sat cross-legged on the blanket of multi-colored leaves. A playful, pleasant breeze scudded more leaves about them, and Tony saw that even Ronny and Orville were busy with their slates.

The experiment was a success. Her pleasure grew. Why, teaching could be real fun, even as she was becoming dignified and an influence in the valley.

Just as she was patting herself on the back, it happened. Sprawled over the leaves and grass, paying no attention to their unusual surroundings, the youngsters were listening to Tony, as she explained why two and two make four, and one and three also make four. That was when Randy decided, from up in his perch in the tree, to suddenly shake a branch.

A rafter of leaves came a tumbling down, spurting right into little Orville's lap. The sudden windfall was too much for Orville. He jumbled the leaves over his head, threw them up into the air, piled a handful of them into Ronny's face, and yelled: "Stampede! Stampede!"

Then he shrieked with delight and began rushing headlong down the hillside, still yelling, "Stampede!" Stumbling and falling and picking himself up and rolling over and over again, down the hillside went little Orville.

It was contagious. In a split-second, the other children had gotten the idea and gone whaling mad. The brisk air, the unusual classroom, the new, pretty teacher —all helped to feed the sudden gust of happy madness. Jumping up, they were dashing off in every-which direction, down all sides of the hill, crying, "Stampede.... Whoo-oo, I'm an Indian," and giving loud, healthy imitations of thundering war whoops.

Tony Handler had walked up the hill easily enough. But in her present need to control the wild children, her new high heels felt as if they were snapping and swaying. She was as rocked and tossed about as the first time she tried to ride an unbroken bronco. She couldn't even run after the escaping youngsters, much less catch one of them.

Watching them run like addlepated rabbits down the hill, one racing after the other, each chased by the wonderful possibility of an unofficial holiday from school, she couldn't help seeing the humor of the situation. Tony entered into the spirit of their whing-ding, and stood there, on top of the hill, watching them hop and skip down toward the path leading to the school house—when she noticed Mr. Ruggles, the stuffy banker, standing down there. He and the rest of the teachers were out of their classrooms, looking up with horror at her. And Rosabelle was down there, teetering on *her* heels, entwining her fingers prayerfully, and gazing up wide-eyed at Tony.

Tony froze.

And then she saw Randy sauntering toward her, drawling, "What happened to the kids? Where'd they gallop off to?"

Her face turned pale.

Randy instantly changed expression to one of concern. He came up close to her,

and protectively took her hand in his.

They both looked back at Mr. Ruggles in time to see little Orville, followed by a pile of the other youngsters, tumble onto the astonished banker. They scrambled over him, and kept on running, down the path and away toward their homes.

The elderly Mr. Ruggles, helped to his feet by the other teachers, wagged his futile fists at Tony.

Shaking, Tony turned pitifully to Randy. His lips were oddly twitching and he had to make an effort to control their outward-turning motion, in order to ask again, "How did it happen? Bad mess."

Tony shook her head numbly, bewildered. "I—I don't know. Everything was going so fine until those leaves fell down."

"There, there," Randy said comfortingly. He put his strong arm around her shoulder, patted her reassuringly, and led her away from the sight of the angry teachers and sputtering banker, to behind the broad-trunked maple.

She tried to pull away. She couldn't face Randy, not now when she had failed almost before his very eyes. "Why, oh why," she moaned, "did that tree have to shake?"

"Don't even think about it," Randy said. He put his arms about her, pinning her to the tree, and his guileless blue eyes looked down tenderly into hers. They took account of her tear-brimmed, sweet face, and then his lips came close.

"No," she started to say, but there was a commanding pressure to his touch, and a yearning hardness to his mouth. "You sweet, adorable kid," he whispered, trailing his lips over her flushed cheeks, lingering on every speck of her little nose, and clinging to the tremulous mouth. She lost all idea of what she had begun to say, yielding quickly to the hard determination of his arms.

Her lips grew warm and soft under his, and her arms came up to hold him tightly and keep him close to her forever. Her eyelids became heavy and closed, and she felt his mouth leaving hers to lightly touch them. Then his lips were back upon hers, cutting into her heart; and glorious rockets were flaming through her soul, blazing a trail for her to paradise.

Their kiss, when it ended, left her shaken. She would have fallen had not Randy's arms still kept her pinioned to the tree. Slowly she pulled herself to awareness, opened her eyes and stared at Randy through a tear-mist.

"Randy," she whispered tenderly, "you don't care about my trouble. It doesn't matter that the leaves fell and the children ran away." He was sober faced, she saw, and there was a gleam in his eyes. With-

out understanding what she was saying, she continued, "That the leaves fell when there wasn't even a breeze."

"Don't worry," Randy said. "It doesn't matter a nailhead."

"But there wasn't even a breeze, Randy. And you got up here so quickly," she said.

"Let me explain to you, darling. I was up in the tree and—"

"Go away," she screamed. "Leave me alone. I don't want to hear any more. You started those buttons on the rampage. You! . . . Being a lady—school teaching—fiddlesticks!"

CHAPTER THREE

Velvet Lips

BOSH and nonsense!" she repeated to herself that afternoon. Tony was back home, sporting her comfortable old levis, banging away at a rickety table on the front porch.

She heard a squeak of a boot, and looked up to see scrawny Timothy Ruggles push himself cautiously within her line of vision. He stopped just out of the vicious arc of Tony's hammer.

Timidly he called her name. She opened and shut her mouth without uttering a sound, knowing much too well what he would say.

"Are you listening?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded her head, setting the glossy brown braids to swinging.

"Look, Tony, it's not my fault, but—" His shoulders seemed to be retreating into his waist as he stood there, waiting for her to help him out. She wouldn't. He continued, "I can't take you to the dance Saturday because of an unforseen engagement that I suddenly remembered I forgot all about."

Then Tony spoke. In fact, she shouted at him, forgetting all about the dignity she wanted so much. "You really mean because of the button stampede, that's what."

Timothy's chin stiffened. "I can't take you," he repeated, "because of an unforseen engagement."

"Your father won't let you take me," Tony said, chanting it over and accenting the words with heavy blows of her hammer. "Your father won't let you take me."

"I—I really want to," he began bravely and honestly, his chin quivering again.

"Your father won't let you, and I won't go with you," Tony sang, striking a shower of splinters as she pounded down on the table.

"Good-by," Timothy said stiffly, almost running in retreat from the splinters.

Only after Timothy Ruggles was out of sight did Tony throw down the hammer and go into the house, sobbing, "Oh, Randy, Randy, just look at what you've made me do. Now I've made a mess of everything." Her whole future lay before her, as blank and empty as a penny bank the day after Christmas. For now she was completely jilted!

Well, she'd show them both! She'd go to the dance herself, driving her own team and holding her head high. And she'd laugh as if she was having a boot-clapping time, even if no one asked her to dance. And the next day, the next day she'd leave the valley lock stock and barrel for good. . . .

The evening of the party arrived beautifully clear. The heavy clouds that had hung threateningly over the valley disappeared before sundown, and now stars were sparkling.

Tony dressed carefully, made each portion of her toilet a sacred part of a ritual, taking more time and putting more thought into it than she ever had before. This was the fateful night when Randolph Barker would bethroth himself to another girl, when Tony would lose forever her chance to ride the double trail to happiness with him. But if it killed her, she would be there to see it happen. For no matter what Randy did, Tony knew now that she loved him truly and always would.

Deliberately she combed each glistening curl into place, smoothed some powder over her flushed, tan cheeks. She looked carefully at her image in the swivel glass, then thoughtfully bit her lips to make them even rosier.

Her ivory velvet gown was a luxury that she had thought much too fine for her, not realizing how the warm color

contrasted and heightened the beauty of her sun-darkened skin. Shiny brown curls were combed high on her head. The low bodice showed more of her smooth shoulders than she'd wanted to, but the ivory velvet curved so tightly around her hips and cascaded so beautifully to the ankles, that she knew the gown made her even more slender and fragile looking than she had ever thought possible. Tony took one last look at herself.

She tied her cape about her shoulders, and went outside to her team. The Whipples had suggested that she go with them, but Tony had thanked them kindly and refused. Now the two roans were waiting, already hitched up, and she carefully raised her gown and climbed into the high-flying seat. At a juggle from her reins, the horses obediently began trotting toward Robber's Canyon. Along the canyon and over Robber's Cliff she would have to go, to get to the dance.

As she approached the cliff, she heard hoof-beats. Without turning her head to look, she knew that those horses loping along so easily were carrying Randy and Rosabelle.

She could hear Randy urging his team faster. Then she knew that they saw her all right because there was another voice, warning, "Better slow up. We can't go through, both at the same time." Tony wondered what Timothy Ruggles was doing in the buggy with them.

But before she had time to puzzle it out, Rosabelle was squealing, "We'll crash! That tomboy's trying to beat us to the cliff!"

Tony *was* racing her roans now. Randy had no right to try and make her wait, go second around the cliff. That would be adding insult to injury, especially as she was closer to the narrow pass. Quickly she belted the off roan with the end of the line. If she could just get over the ridge next the cliff—

Randy unexpectedly shouted loudly, "Wahoo, doggies!" Her restive roans hit their collars. Clinging perilously to her tilting seat, she stiffened, gathering a tight hold on her reins. Tony shied the horses off the narrow passageway, blocking it. The wheels grated on the road as they skidded, and she had to grab the reins with all her strength.

IN THE minutes it took her to quiet her team, Randy had also hauled his team short and jumped to the ground, running the brief distance to her. With one fast motion he caught her reins from her hands and reached for her, pulling her down off the seat and into his arms.

Tony shouted, "You fool-brained galoot! Why'd you try to spill me? You knew I wouldn't let you take the cliff first!"

His words were an easy drawl. "If you were the lady you've been play-actin' all week, you wouldn't have tried to outrace me."

"I'm not no lady—and you know it," she shouted, forgetting all grammar.

Smugly he shouted back, "That's what I wanted to hear."

"Oh," she said. "I meant—"

"Now don't go confusing the issue," he teased. "You're not being a lady is good enough for me."

THEY'RE PROMOTING JIM TO THAT JOB I WANTED-THAT'S THE SECOND TIME THEY'VE PASSED ME BY-I OUGHT TO QUIT
JOHN-JOHN-JOHN-CAN'T YOU HEAR? DINNER'S READY! MAYBE THAT'S YOUR TROUBLE AT THE OFFICE
THEN MARY-I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN WITH THIS PARAVOX HEARING AID
AND I CAN HARDLY TELL YOU'RE WEARING IT
LATER JOHN- WE NEED A NEW ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT AND YOU'RE IT! NICE RAISE IN PAY, TOO
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"But Rosabelle—"

"Darn Rosabelle," he said, and kissed her. This time his lips encompassed all the sweetness and tenderness in the world that she had ever dreamed of. It was like grabbing hold of the tail of a flaming rocket, and spinning clear onto the clouds . . . . How the kiss affected Randy she didn't know, but it took her a whole wonderful, dizzy minute to recover her balance when he finally let her go.

Tony and Randy

"Randy," she whispered in muted tones. "Why didn't you ever tell me that you loved me?"

The man who held her so closely in his arms drawled, "Land sakes, honey, I plumb got so used to having you around me, underfoot, I didn't hardly realize it could ever be different."

Tony demanded, suddenly angry, "Then why did you say you were going to marry Rosabelle?"

"You didn't hear me right, honey. I didn't mean I was going to marry the schoolmarn—I said that's what the busybodies were saying. We just cooked up a little plot to help her put her brand on Timothy. Rosabelle thought my squiring her would make him jealous, and I—"

Tony interrupted: "Then you never minded my being a tomboy?"

"Minded! 'Course not, honey. But since you seemed so het up about it, I calculated a week would be about time enough to let you discover that you're not cut out to be anything but my kind of woman. While you been fussin' about what those old gossips' talk, I've been puttin' things to rights on my ranch."

"What about that stampede of the younkers?" Tony asked.

He grinned sheepishly. "I thought you would see how blamed silly the whole thing was. Anyway, I was aiming to tell you then and there I loved you—but you ran away." He tilted her chin upward. "Only lesson I care about you paying a mind to—is remembering that I love you. Not Rosabelle or Celia Dowdson or any other sage hen."

It was as if a mask had been lifted from her eyes and she could see again clearly, know that Randy's kind of love for her was like hers, not dependent on little things.

Sighing with pleasure, she started walking toward the now-quiet team with Randy, when she glanced downward and saw that the hem of her luxurious velvet gown was ragged. It had been torn when she whipped the horses to a halt.

Before she could think, she uttered, "Oh, Randy. My dress is torn and I must look a sight. What'll they say when they see me?"

He shook his towseled head and pulled her back into his arms. "Shucks, honey, I don't care about your torn dress." He grinned. "Wouldn't care if it was split all the way to kingdom come. I like you just the way you are, in a dress or in levis. And, anyway, honey, what with this and that, I suspect we'll probably never get to that shindig. If we're going to get married before the weather turns frosty, I gotta do my courtin' startin' now."

"But what about Rosabelle and Timothy?" she asked, glancing at the other stalled buckboard.

Randy winked. "They don't seem likely to make it to the shindig either." He held her more tightly, saying, "How'll you feel if you don't get a chance to wow more'n me with that plumb pretty dress you're wearing?"

Tony figured she'd prove to Randy she'd learned her lesson for good. Dreamily she moved her lips that were softer than the velvet gown to his, taking time out to reply, "That case, I'll know I'm in heaven."

And then she proved that she knew how to take him there with her.

THE END

POPULAR FILMS

A Guide to Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "Mother Is A Freshman" with Loretta Young, Van Johnson, Rudy Vallee (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.

Mother (Loretta Young) is a financially embarrassed, young widow who actually does go to college when she discovers that a peculiar scholarship, for which she is eligible, will help keep her sophomore daughter in school. Actually, daughter has stars in her eyes for the dashing young professor (Van Johnson). Endless complications ensue and the widow's legal adviser (Rudy Vallee) and the professor tangle over her affections. Needless to say, all ends well with professor getting Mother, daughter getting handsome football stars. Rudy Vallee loses the gal as usual but makes a lot of fun in doing it. *Light and amusing.*

* * *

For A Western: "The Streets of Laredo" with Macdonald Carey, William Holden, William Bendix, Mona Freeman (Paramount). Technicolor.

When three badmen split up and two get into the Texas Rangers by mistake, there's trouble afoot, pard. William Holden and William Bendix are the hombres who turn good and refuse to tip off their former partner, Macdonald Carey, on big jobs. This leads to complications when Holden refuses to bring in Carey—a source of irritation to the Rangers. Bendix, however, goes after him and then gets shot for his efforts. Holden, stirred to action, mixes it up and has a showdown. *There's plenty of chase, shooting—and you'll also be seeing lovely Mona Freeman in full color.*

* * *

For Adventure: "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).

Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Amid storms and iceburgs, the old man tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety-day wonder. *For those that like some salt—and, also, human interest, in their pictures.*

* * *

For Intrigue: "The Bribe" with Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, Charles Laughton, Vincent Price, John Hodiak (MGM).

Government-agent Rigby (Robert Taylor), on an island off the coast of Central America, is in search of a gang which falsely condemns surplus airplane motors, reassembles and sells them at exorbitant prices in South America. In cracking the case, Rigby tangles with a beautiful cabaret singer (Ava Gardner), her drunken husband (John Hodiak) and several assorted villains. Pay-off comes when Rigby orders a raid on the plant which he has discovered, and shoots it out with the leader of the gang (Vincent Price). *Good villainy, ominous action—and of course, Ava Gardner.*

* * *

For Mystery: "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).

A transient worker, looking for a job, finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) the hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor. This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

* * *

BEAU FOR A BUTTON

♥ ♥ By Bill Severn ♥ ♥

Gayle wasn't too young to know that it took more than scented water to cut sign on a hard-to-get rannyhan.

GAYLE felt uncomfortable in the tight-corseted dress and high-buttoned shoes, but when she stood on the chair to get a good look at herself in the mirror she decided the results were worth the discomfort. Touching her hands to the curved fullness of her hips, she grinned a bit and tossed back her head. A tumble of golden curls brushed her tanned shoulders.

She was glad pa had taken the week to go down to Mercer City on business. If he ever saw her in a ruffled, bare-throated outfit like this, he'd probably forget she was seventeen and take the hairbrush to her.

From the window of her room, she watched the bunkhouse impatiently until she saw Ken come out. He was duded up worse than she was, slicked and shined and looking so darned tall, big and handsome, Gayle got all warm around her heart just seeing him. But there was another kind of warmth in Gayle, too. The kind that comes from being angry enough to tie knots in a rattlesnake.

Only—Rina Lynch didn't rattle and hiss. It was all coos and blushes with Rina.

Gayle picked up the parasol that went with the dress. For a girl who has spent all her years living in the sun, riding and roping and wearing jeans or simple ginghams, she felt kind of silly toting a strip of silk on a stick to keep the sun off her. But the parasol might come in handy. If Ken dared laugh at her, she'd bat him with it.

He didn't laugh. He blinked like the sun had got him. "What—" he started. "Where did you get that dress?"

She tried to make her smile deep and mysterious, like the one of the girl on the calendar in her room. "In town yesterday," she said. "Do you like it, Ken?"

His eyes told her. His wide, brown love-blind eyes that had never taken that kind of a look at her before. They touched over her slowly, hesitated here and there and then came up to her own eyes with a half-embarrassed puzzlement. It was as if Ken were almost ashamed of himself for thinking whatever he was thinking about a kid who had been practically a sister to him ever since he took over as foreman of the Bar X three years before.

"You're right pretty," he said finally. "But it's sort of warm to wear on a day like this, isn't it?"

"I don't feel warm." She looked up at him. "Can I ride in with you? I mean, as long as you're taking the wagon anyhow."

"Well, I—" He cleared his throat. "I may be late coming back, Gayle. Lots of business I have to take care of—post office and everything. Of course you're welcome, but maybe it can wait until tomorrow."

"Thanks." She slipped her hand beneath his arm. "I knew you wouldn't mind." Gayle laughed a little. "I won't be in the way. I have things to do, too."

She could imagine the kind of post office he wanted to play with Rina Lynch. Not that he'd get more than a peck of a

Gayle pulled away. "Goodness, what am I doing?"

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

kiss and a promise from Rina. That was her game, flirting and half-promising all the men who courted her, playing hard to get while she decided which one would make her the best husband. Now that Ken was finishing up his last month as boss of the Bar X and had bought a small spread of his own up-valley, Rina might figure she had stalled long enough.

Men didn't come better than Ken, or husband either. Even if Gayle hadn't been in love with him since she was heart-high to his grin, she could have understood Rina's interest. From a scratch of ground and a scatter of steers, Ken had built the Bar X into one of the best ranches in the valley.

He would do the same for his own spread, with the right wife to help him. But what did a powderpuff of a town girl know about living on a ranch or working with a man for the future? Sure, Rina was pretty; maybe even beautiful. But a man needs more than promises.

Gayle lifted herself to the wagon with a free-swinging bounce that swirled the full skirt around her legs as she slid down into the seat. A teasing huff of wind caught the dancing ruffles and reminded her she wasn't wearing jeans. She followed Ken's glance and smiled again as she moved over for him to take the reins.

SHE was afraid he would be angry over the way she had invited herself along, but he didn't appear too annoyed as he headed the wagon across the flat brown-green ranch land toward the town road. The wheels bounced and rocked in the road and somehow Gayle slipped over close to him. Ken didn't seem to mind that too much either.

He kept giving her little looks and then fixing his eyes straight ahead as if he were telling himself she couldn't possibly be aware of the way her shoulder bumped his or of how the wind caught a strand of her hair and momentarily tickled it across his cheek.

Gayle had planned the rest of it. Exactly how she would plant the idea in his mind. She wasn't Rina, with half-a-dozen men chasing her. She couldn't be like that and didn't want to be. But she could be—well, womanly. Rina had no patent on that sort of wily petticoat behavior.

"There's something I want to ask you, Ken. I—I wouldn't have the nerve except we've always been such good friends." She put her hand on his arm. "I mean— I can talk to you the way I wouldn't to any other man."

"Sure." He patted her hand. His eyes met hers a second and he took his fingers away. "What's troubling you?"

"Not troubling really." Gayle lowered her voice. "Did you ever hear of sweetheart's perfume, Ken?"

"What?" His head jerked. His hands pulled the reins. The wagon stopped. Ken turned to her.

"I was just asking." She laughed. "I heard some of the girls talking about the medicine show that's in town. Doc Frisbee. He doesn't make a practice of selling it out in the open, but if you go back after the show you can buy a special kind of perfume that will make whoever breathes it feel like—falling in love."

"You shouldn't be listening to such things." Ken's face darkened beneath its tan, but there was a lot of wondering and questioning in his expression.

"But do you think it's true?"

"If it is, he should be run out. Anybody who'd sell something to fog folks into—" He shut off the rest of it, his mouth tight. "We won't talk of it, Gayle," he said.

She sighed softly. "I thought you'd understand." Gayle shook her head. "Doc Frisbee's been selling it to the men and they give it some girl as a present, I guess. But I can't go and buy it. That wouldn't look right for a girl."

"You?" Ken dropped the reins. He swung all the way around in the seat and faced her. "Have you been seeing some man?"

"Goodness." Gayle laughed again. "I'm not a baby. It's time I was finding a husband. And what's wrong about perfume—I mean if she really loves him."

"Gayle!"

"I guess I shouldn't be so frank—even with you."

Ken spoke as if he were thinking aloud. "That dress. All those trips into town." He nodded slowly. "Who is he?"

She hid her smile. "I'd rather not say."

"Do I know him?"

"Yes."

"I suppose he's—kissed you and filled your head with a lot of romantic dreams? Listen to me, Gayle." He gripped her arms. "You can't throw yourself at the first man who comes along. You're too sweet, too nice—"

"He hasn't kissed me," she interrupted. "But I want him to. I want him to ask me to marry him. Maybe there's nothing to that perfume, but it wouldn't hurt to try."

"You'll try nothing!" Ken held her like he wanted to shake her. "Not while I'm in charge. When your father gets back, he can deal with you as he pleases. But if I catch any man near you, he'll wish he wasn't." His hands gradually relaxed and he let her go. He slapped the reins. "You behave yourself, understand?"

"Then you won't buy it for me?"

"I'll buy you a good stiff paddling!" Ken sat back. He was silent all the rest of the way into town, frowning like he was thinking hard. And Gayle didn't break into it with talk.

She held out her hand to him and let Ken help her down when he stopped the wagon in front of the post office. It wasn't her fault that the walk was so low she had to hold close to him a second to steady herself.

Ken kept her hand until she slipped it free. He stood watching while she smoothed her skirt and fussed the tiny ribbon bows into place at her shoulders. "You're meeting him, aren't you?" he said. "That's why you were so anxious to ride into town."

"You came to see Rina, didn't you?" Gayle flicked open the parasol and lifted it between them. "Don't worry about me." She turned. "And don't hurry on my account, Ken. I'll be around town when you're ready to go home." Gayle crossed the street, pulling aside her skirt so it wouldn't trail in the dust.

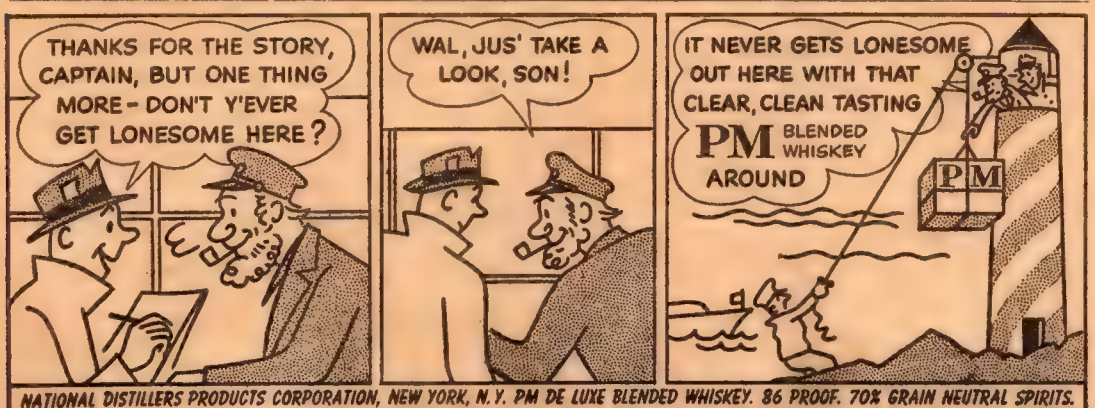
From inside the dry-goods store, she watched him through the door curtains. Ken still stood where she had left him. He had his hand to his chin, rubbing it slowly, and his puzzled frown was deep. He moved away slowly in the direction of Rina's house, but not with the eagerness of a man about to visit the girl he loved. Gayle's eyes followed him until he reached the end of the block.

BUT she lost her smile when he stopped at the medicine wagon. The tattered canvas banner advertised: *Doctor Frisbee's Indian Miracle Liniment.* Ken paused in front of it. There was no show now, no sale being ballyhooed. Gayle held her breath as Ken stepped around to the rear of the wagon.

That wasn't the idea she had meant to put in his mind. She had told him the perfume wouldn't hurt to try. With Rina holding off about marriage, Ken apparently had decided anything was worth attempting. He was buying sweetheart's perfume for Rina!

Gayle's heart dropped. All the happiness went out of her. It hadn't been enough to make Ken realize she was a woman. She had set him thinking and maybe worried him by her talk of an imaginary boy friend. But only like a protective big brother. And yet, for a few moments there in the wagon, the touch of his hand and the look of his eyes hadn't been exactly brotherly.

She bought a spool of cotton and went


THANKS FOR THE STORY, CAPTAIN, BUT ONE THING MORE - DON'T Y'EVER GET LONESOME HERE?
WAL, JUS' TAKE A LOOK, SON!
IT NEVER GETS LONESOME OUT HERE WITH THAT CLEAR, CLEAN TASTING PM BLENDED WHISKEY AROUND
PM
NATIONAL DISTILLERS PRODUCTS CORPORATION, NEW YORK, N.Y. PM DE LUXE BLENDED WHISKEY. 86 PROOF. 70% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS.

over to the post office to ask about the mail. Gayle inspected the shop windows and strolled back up the street, wondering what she would do to kill the afternoon. As she crossed the street again, Ken called to her.

Gayle swung around. *Wasn't Rina home?* Ken came up the walk with a grin all over his face, looking as pleased with himself as a kid who just swiped the cookie jar. Did that mean he had seen Rina? Had he made a date with her for tonight? Maybe he was thinking how he would get Rina to use that perfume on herself.

"If you're through with all you've to do," he said, "we might as well head back to the ranch."

"Yes, I—I'm through."

Ken held out his arms. He lifted her up to the wagon. She shut her eyes a second, imagining his arms around Rina. Gayle didn't really believe what was whispered about that perfume. *But it might be true!*

"You didn't stay long at Rina's."

Ken drove without answering a minute. Absently, he fingered the heavy tooled-leather butt of the wagon whip. "What about the man you were going to meet?"

"I didn't say I was." She lifted her head. "Let's not start that again. Bossing the Bar X doesn't include me. I know you mean well, Ken, but—"

"You really love him?" he interruped softly.

"Yes."

"And he loves you?"

Gayle glanced down. "I think he does. He would if he gave himself a chance. It's just that I've been too close to him, too much of a pal for him to realize—"

"If it's like that," Ken said, "I have no right to keep you from him."

The wagon hit a tiny bump. The jolt shouldn't have been enough to make Ken pitch forward the way he did. The butt of the whip struck the pocket of his shirt. There was a tinkle of glass and a sudden sharp aroma. Ken sat back again without saying a word. But Gayle watched the dark stain spread from his pocket.

She stared at it. Slowly, she raised her eyes to his. The perfume wasn't for Rina. It was for her. Ken figured he couldn't make her a gift of it and expect her to use it, so he had staged this deliberate little accident to spill the scent upon the air. He wanted *her* to love him.

Gayle felt like laughing and crying at the same time. She struggled to keep her face straight. That perfume was like nothing she had ever used, not wild roses nor apple blossoms. It stung her eyes and made her want to cough. But to Gayle it was sweeter than all the smells of summer.

The wagon jogged slowly into the sun that spread its gold over the ranch. Gayle let her head fall on Ken's shoulder. "I feel—funny," she said. "All sort of—I don't know—funny. She snuggled closer.

"Ken, I—" Gayle reached up and kissed him. She pulled away. "Goodness, what am I doing?"

"Acting like a girl in love." Ken grinned. He fished into his pocket and tossed the broken pieces of the bottle over the side of the wagon. "I didn't buy any sweetheart's perfume, Gayle. Nothing but a small size of plain ordinary liniment. But I saw you watching me from the store. I got sort of an idea about this man of yours. I figured if I was right and you thought I spilled some of that perfume stuff . . ." He took her all the way into his arms and kissed her. "I have been blind, Gayle. And dumb and stupid—"

"Hush, darling." Gayle's lips silenced him. "You're talking about the man I love."

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

COURTIN' KISSES

By Hattie Blanch Kimball

I caught the little saucy curl
That danced upon her cheek
As we stood upon the footbridge
Which spanned the babbling creek.

Her eyes of blue saw in my face
The love I could not hide,
And so I begged, "Dear, promise me
You'll be my lovely bride."

The curl clung to my finger still
Like threads of shining gold
As I repeated in soft words
The story often told.

She raised her sweet face temptingly
And said, "I am your girl."
I kissed her lips, and then for luck
I kissed the saucy curl.

The brook still bubbled 'neath the bridge—
But life was grander now,
For with that tender, trembling kiss
We sealed our loving vow.

STAR-TOTER'S CAPTIVE QUEEN

By Thelma Knoles

WAITING in the shade at the side of Murphy's General Store at Lincoln Camp for her stepfather to bring the wagon around, Bonnie's blue eyes brightened with sudden interest as she watched a border patrolman ride up and dismount. Stepping down from the saddle with the sure grace of hard-muscled, disciplined strength, he knotted the reins of his chestnut at the hitching rack and then turned toward the store.

Now Bonnie could see that his square chin was dented with a dimple, that his mouth was warm, though straight and firm. A little shiver of excitement went through her.

Just as the tall patrolman reached for the store door, it flew open, and a girl bustled out. She was looking back over her shoulder, laughing and calling to Mike Murphy. Before the officer could dodge, she'd bumped squarely into him, sending packages flying all over the board walk.

"Why, Vic Wyatt!" the girl cried in graceful confusion. "What a surprise!"

Bonnie shifted her small *huarached* feet in the thick dust and yanked her sombrero farther over tumbled, chestnut-colored curls. Her red lips curled at the corners. Surprise, indeed! Anyone, even a man, would have to be pretty simple not to savvy Belle Connolly's carefully timed little scene.

"Howdy, Belle," Vic Wyatt was chuckling, as he swooped down to gather up her parcels. "Looks like you bought out old Murphy."

"Oh, just a few trifles." Belle giggled, making a gesture at helping him that brought her blonde pompadour very close to his dark head.

"Bonnie, let's vamoose!" came a bellow from the road. Bonnie turned hastily to see her stepfather waiting with the wagon.

Before she stepped out into the white glare of the sun and hurried past the couple on the boardwalk, she stuffed her rich brown curls up under her wide hat, then pulled its brim well down over her eyes. She'd be hog-tied and branded befor she'd let them see that she was a girl, too—a girl clad in the oldest and most faded jeans and shirt.

She jumped lightly up and settled herself on the seat beside Ed, who flapped the reins and started the team off at a trot.

She turned for a backward glance, as they jolted along the rough road. With the blonde Belle clinging to his arm, holding her beruffled skirts daintily high above the dust, and his hands full of her purchases, the patrolman was walking toward the shiny buggy hitched farther down the road.

So *that* was Vic Wyatt, famous along the border for his good work for Uncle Sam, Bonnie thought, with a pleasurable shiver. He *did* look hard-headed and

♥ *When the handsome lawman caught Bonnie border-crossing,* ♥
♥ *he was fit to be tied—* ♥
♥ *to her heart-strings.* ♥

She said teasingly: "You're keeping your head, Mr. Wyatt. . . ."

rather ruthless—but mighty sweet too.

"See that high-and-mighty badge-toter making up to Bob Connolly's daughter," yelled Ed above the rumble and clatter of the wagon. "Aims on featherin' *his* nest and retiring from line-riding before someone puts a bullet through him some dark night."

"I—I heard he already had a little spread of his own," Bonnie replied, "right over Puma Pass." Her cheeks showed more color than the stinging wind had whipped into them, but she couldn't resist adding, "And it was *her* shining up to *him,* besides."

Ed shot Bonnie a sharp glance. "Don't be getting any foolish notions in *yore* head over a flashy uniform," he warned. "Anything I don't cotton to it's them bossy, snoopy hombres totin' a badge. And you're a sight too young to be makin' calf's eyes at any hombre, young lady."

Bonnie stared straight ahead with hot, resentful blue eyes. She was eighteen last May, she'd like to have reminded Ed. He wasn't her real father anyhow—and since her mother died two years ago, he'd dragged her from pillar to post about the country so she couldn't finish school, couldn't make friends.

"Don't worry," she said through trembling lips, looking bitterly down at her worn clothes. "It's not likely that Vic Wyatt ever would take a second look at me."

Nevertheless the image of the tall, broad-shouldered patrolman stayed with her for all the ride through sand dunes and mesquite to the little adobe shack that they were now calling home.

VIC'S warm chuckle still sounded in her ears, when she slipped away from the house after supper and made her soundless way down toward the river that followed the international line. Bonnie moved as silent as an Indian maiden through the thick screen of a willow thicket. In the small clearing beyond, she saw Leon already waiting—a darker shadow among the other shadows. Instead of going forward to meet him, she came to a stop.

Silently she backed out of the thicket the way she had come. She didn't want to talk to Leon tonight. She still felt sorry for him, and the way he was haunted by fears of revengeful followers from his homeland.

But tonight pity for Leon was blanked out by the memory of an easy-moving, lithe-framed border patrolman. Her sensitive fingers lightly followed along the barbed wire till she was midway between two posts. She parted the spiked strands, held them ready to slide through. *Was that a rustle in the brush nearby? After all, this* was *the international border.*

Carefully Bonnie put one blue-jeaned leg between the wires, bent low, and groped for the feel of ground on the other side of the fence.

"Halt!" Out of the darkness, the deep-voiced command snapped at her.

Bonnie, halfway through the fence, jerked violently and then froze as her shirt was caught by a barb. Her heart was pounding painfully. She recognized that voice.

"Raise your hands and step forward!" came the second crisp order.

"I c-can't," Bonnie said in a small voice. "I'm c-caught in the wire."

To be found in this humiliating way by Vic Wyatt was more than she could bear. She made a jerky movement and her shoulder was pierced by a second vicious spike. She bit down her cry of pain.

There was the rasp of a match against a bootsole and a small flame flared close to Bonnie's face. It flickered into blue eyes that were dilated to black and stretched to their widest. It touched golden gleams from the brown curls tumbled on her shoulders and high-lighted a paper-white, delicate little face.

"Holy smoke!" Vic Wyatt exploded. "It's a kid—a girl!"

Bonnie turned her head away, and reached back to fumble awkwardly with the barbs holding her shirt.

The patrolman dropped his match, straightened the wire with capable fingers, and set the trembling girl free. She straightened up with the resilience of a young willow, and tossed back her mane of hair. The moon chose that moment to rise over the mountains, and its growing light shone full in Bonnie's face.

Vic Wyatt's keen gaze swept over her from head to foot, and Bonnie visibly

shrank, frightened—and embarrassed, too.

"Why, you're the little Atbury girl," he announced. Then he asked sternly, "What are you doing, sneaking across the border this time of night?"

Bonnie's round little chin came up. "I wasn't sneaking," she declared. "I was coming home." She tried to sound righteously indignant. "I'd been to see a friend across the line, and I was just coming home."

"Friend?" he demanded. "What kind of friend would get a youngster to sneak across into Mexico at night?"

Bonnie bit her full underlip. She didn't want him speaking to her this way. She wanted to hear that rich warmth in his voice, that flattering recognition of a charming girl that he'd shown toward Belle Connolly.

"Now that you know I have a perfect right to be in my own country I'll go on home," she said proudly, and started to walk away. Tears were gathering back of her eyelids, and she wanted only to escape pronto.

A firm hand closed on her shoulder. "Not so fast, little lady."

Bonnie trembled clear down to her worn *huaraches*—and it wasn't wholly from fear. "Let me go!" she cried in a choked voice.

"Not till I savvy what monkey-business goes on," said her captor promptly.

Bonnie managed a shaky laugh that was meant to be scornful. "Go ahead and search me, Mr. Vic Wyatt," she dared him, "if you dare suspect *me* of bringing contraband across the line."

"I just want you to answer a few questions," Vic said quietly.

Bonnie took a deep breath to steady herself, rammed her small fists into her pockets and maintained a stubborn silence to all his questions about her friend across the border. She had no notion of betraying Leon—poor Leon who was hunted like a wild animal because of some silly old political business back in Europe.

When Vic switched abruptly to the subject of her stepfather, she talked readily enough. And as her tension vanished, Bonnie lost her desire to flee.

After all, it was too dark to see how faded and worn her clothes were. The night closed them into a murmuring intimacy. Bonnie found herself talking freely, skipping from her unhappiness in the life her stepfather had chosen the past two years to the present. Her voice brightened with hope that they'd settle down here for keeps, now that Ed had bought this run-down cattle ranch and gone in for archaeology. He spent most of his time at Apache Cave, she explained, digging for burial urns and Indian relics.

Vic remarked thoughtfully, "The folks around here decided Atbury was a harmless old crank, an archaeological nut."

Bonnie felt a quickening excitement. He didn't sound suspicious and stern anymore. He sounded friendly and interested.

Now he said almost softly, "And about this friend you visit across the line? How did you meet him?"

Bonnie hesitated, then she said truthfully, "Why, I was walking along by the river here one evening, in the moonlight, and he came by."

"What's his name?" Vic slipped the question in evenly.

Bonnie shook her head. "He's doing no one any harm," she assured the patrolman. "He's just lonely—like me."

AT LAST! A DRESSING AMERICA'S BEEN WAITING FOR

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In the moonlight she saw the tightening of his lips. No, Vic Wyatt would never forget *his* duty, not for a minute, not for all the silver moonlight in the world, she realized.

"I'll take you home now," he declared abruptly.

HE LIFTED her onto his horse, settled her easily in his arms, while the big chestnut began to pick his way along the river bank as though carrying double were part of his regular nightly procedure. Bonnie gripped the saddle horn, tinglingly conscious of the strong arms encircling her, of the square hand lightly holding the reins just under her eyes.

As they drew nearer the small adobe house huddled under a leaning windmill and towering cottonwoods, she grew more and more afraid that Ed would see her coming home—in the arms of the law.

She twisted about. "Please," she asked, "put me down. I don't want Ed, my stepfather, to see me coming back."

"Whoa, Chief," Vic said promptly, and the big chestnut halted in the shadow of a stand of live oaks. "If I let you down now, will you promise never to go across the line alone at night again?"

Bonnie was stubbornly silent. Maybe she never would go to meet Leon again—but she wasn't going to make any such promise. And, she realized, with a little flutter of delight, she was in no hurry for Vic Wyatt to put her down.

She'd most likely never see him again to talk to. Or if she did, it would be with Belle, all big, baby-blue eyes, and ruffles and perfume and girlish giggles to claim all Vic's attention. But now, with the moon showering its cool silvery light on them, she was held close to him, her silken hair brushing his shoulder, its natural flowerlike fragrance very close. So Bonnie simply sat silent.

Vic said gently, "You're such a kid, Bonnie, that you can't know what danger a girl like you—young, sweet, pretty—can attract. There are desperate men along the border, on both sides. Hunted outlaws who've already broken every law of the land. A pretty young thing like you would seem fair game to them. Why," he chuckled, "holding you like this is enough to turn the head of the most level-headed hombre."

Bonnie felt a wave of heady excitement go through her. She said teasingly, tilting her head back, "You're keeping *your* head, Mr. Wyatt."

"Don't bet on that," he assured her. Bonnie's heartbeat broke into double time. He added, "And don't forget that promise. It *is* a promise, isn't it?"

In a daze Bonnie nodded, hearing only the thrilling earnestness of his tone. Vic stepped down from his horse, lifted Bonnie to the ground.

For a tense instant his arms were around her, then he swiftly kissed her upturned mouth. Bonnie felt stars shooting through her, bursting into fiery glory.

Still in a daze, she watched him ride away. . . .

The sun rode high next day when Bonnie climbed the trail up the bluff to the cave where Ed worked in the dusty ruins. Her head was bent as she picked her way among the sharp stones, carrying her stepfather's lunch in a paper bag under her arm.

Not seeing the horseman on the other side of the river, she jumped nervously at Vic's loud, cheery hail, "Howdy, Bonnie!"

Color blazed into her cheeks and her heart took such a bound she couldn't have caught her breath to speak. She waved toward Vic, who swept off his hat. Bonnie thought she'd never seen a man so proud, so sure of himself, so utterly handsome.

Across the canyon Vic waved his hat and then rode on. Bonnie turned away and scrambled up the bluff to give Ed his lunch. She was glad that a huge boulder hid her from the patrolman when Ed met her with a scowl.

"How come that badge-toter's hanging around Apache Canyon?" he demanded. "If he ever sets foot on this place, I'll blast the daylights outta him—law or not. This is private property!"

"Oh, he was just riding by, likely," Bonnie said nervously.

That evening Bonnie felt too restless to stay home. Ed was gone, and there was no real reason why she shouldn't meet Leon for one last time. It was only right

to tell him that she wouldn't slip across the river for their meetings any more.

Of course, she hadn't really promised Vic Wyatt not to go even once more. Besides, he'd never know, and he really didn't care what Bonnie Atbury did or didn't do.

When Bonnie went through the screening willows, Leon came away from the crumbling old adobe wall that was their trysting place. "Bonnie, I've been waiting so long!"

"I can only stay a minute," she whispered. "The border patrolman stopped me last night." She didn't explain that it was on her way home.

"What?" Leon's voice was sharp with suspicion. "What did you tell him?" He peered into her face, and in the half light he looked suddenly like a stranger, his eyes glittering dark under amazingly fair hair. His fingers bit into her wrist. "What did you say, Bonnie?"

"N-nothing! Nothing at all!" She pulled at her hand and Leon let her go.

He muttered something in a strange language and then looked down at her with his old smile. "Don't look alarmed, little one. I can't be too careful. If—certain people—knew I were here, my life wouldn't be worth that!" He snapped his fingers.

Leon took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead, sighing deeply. Instantly a rush of sympathy caught the girl. She put her hand on his arm. "I do understand, Leon," she said softly.

He smiled wanly, "Well, my little one, you can help me in a small way."

He bent and picked up a small pottery bowl. "This was given me by a man from the interior, for your stepfathter. I promised to place it in the cave for him tonight, but if that Vic Wyatt—" Bonnie flinched at the venom in his voice as he pronounced the patrolman's name—"is guarding the line, I can't risk it." He paused and added in a more natural tone. "It's an old burial urn that Atbury is anxious to get hold of."

Bonnie took the bowl, asked uneasily, "Do you want me to give it to him?" If she gave it to Ed, he'd know she'd been meeting Leon. Even if her stepfather knew him, she had a feeling he'd disapprove of her nightly rendezvous with anyone.

"No," said Leon. "Just put it in the entrance of the cave. That's where he expects to find it."

"I'll go now then." Bonnie told herself that it was her anxiety to get the urn safely off her hands that made her evade Leon's demanding eyes, to pretend she didn't hear when he called her back.

MOVING as lightly and swiftly as the cool breeze blowing along the river banks, Bonnie reached the barbed wire line, slipped safely through it and climbed the trail to Apache Cave. She sat down at the entrance with the bowl in her lap, resting an instant before starting downward.

She froze into stillness as a pebble scraped harshly behind her, and a well-remembered voice snapped, "Stay right where you are!"

Then a firm hand grasped her shoulder. "So this is the way you keep your word! I followed you from the line."

Vic pulled her to her feet. He took the urn out of her hands. "What's this?"

"Just—just an old piece of pottery I was leaving here for Ed," Bonnie explained faintly. Her heart was knocking wildly against her ribs. She felt guilty and frightened, but underneath those feelings she was keenly alive to the tingling of her arm under that hard clasp.

Vic held the urn up in the dim light. "Your friend across the line gave you this?"

Bonnie nodded. Vic let her go. Kneeling, he emptied the pottery bowl on the flat rock at their feet.

"There's just dirt and ashes in there, and maybe some old charred bones," said Bonnie, puzzled.

"And this!" His voice was hard with triumph. He held up a small can. With his pocket knife he pried up the top. Then he struck a match, held it to the can. "Opium!"

Bonnie gasped. There was a ringing in her ears. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched wide and dark. Opium! Delivered to her stepfather here at Apache Cave! But Leon? She knew instantly that Leon was innocent. Some-

one had given him that urn to deliver to her stepfather. Someone who knew the risk and wouldn't take it himself. Leon had been used as a tool by an unscrupulous gang.

Vic Wyatt, every inch the toughest man in the Border Patrol, fixed his gaze on the girl's face with eyes like the cold steel of gunbarrels. She had the helpless sensation that he was examining her thoughts. "What do you know about this?" he demanded sharply.

She made a wild effort to control her expression. Swiftly she dropped the screening lashes over her eyes, set her small mouth tightly. "Nothing!"

Vic thrust the opium can in front of her face, "You double-crossing, baby-faced little crook!" She winced, but he went on, "Feeding me all that hot air last night and all the time planning to come back here and get this dope across the line!"

"Oh, no!" she protested.

"And I almost fell for it." His voice was rough with self-disgust. "I actually felt sorry for you. Was trying to figure some way to get you away from Atbury." He shoved the can into his shirt pocket and caught her upper arms. "Laugh! Why don't you laugh, you clever little dope-runner?"

"Let me go!" Bonnie cried.

"I aim to drag everything you know about this business from that little, lying pink mouth!" He went on bitterly, "To think I warned *you* about the dangerous characters along the border while you were playing me for such a sucker!"

He gave her a sharp shake, and Bonnie's head snapped back. She had a flashing glimpse of the hard bulge in his shirt pocket that was made by the opium can. *That* was the evidence that would send both the Mexican and American authorities after Leon. Ed didn't matter. He belonged in prison. But Leon didn't deserve this. He had suffered enough, and to be connected with dope-running would ruin him completely.

Vic's angry face was close to hers. He meant to force the truth from her—the truth about Leon's identity.

Bonnie gave a weak moan. She went limp in his grasp and sagged downward. For an instant he held her there, dangling like a rag doll. Then he slipped one arm under her shoulders. Still she didn't stir. The faint moonlight shone on her pale face, the dark smudge of her eyelashes, the violet shadows around her eyes.

The big patrolman held her rigidly, glaring down at her. Then he muttered uncertainly, "Kid's scared to death—maybe that brute made her do it. Maybe she couldn't help herself."

He touched her face with his finger, but she remained still, apparently entirely unconscious of his change of mood. He shifted her in his arms so that she rested against his chest. His head bent toward her.

Then Bonnie came to quick life. One small hand darted into his shirt pocket, seized the can of opium and flung it out—far out over the cliff.

With a choked exclamation Vic flung Bonnie away and ran to the bluff. There was the faint tinkle of tin hitting stone and then a muted splash. Bonnie sank to the ground sobbing with relief—and shame.

Vic came back to her. He stood looking down at her while fierce sputterings rumbled from his throat and his big hands knotted into powerful fists.

Bonnie looked up at him, her blue eyes drenched with tears. "Go ahead!" she sobbed. "Do anything you want to me! I guess you have a r-right to!"

"I ought to shoot *myself!*" he finally growled out of the depths of his fury. "Of all the soft-brained idiots in this world, I take the cake!"

"You'll g-get Ed later, anyhow," Bonnie said through chattering teeth, "and I don't care. But I won't let you p-persecute an innocent man and ruin his life just because he thought he was doing someone a favor!"

Vic jammed his hat on his head.

"Go ahead and arrest me," Bonnie sobbed on. "I'd just as soon be dead, anyhow."

"Oh, go on home," ordered Vic disgustedly. "I don't want you. I want that gang. And I'll get them, every damned one of them!"

He started to turn away, turned back and jerked her to her feet. "But before you go, I'll take the kiss that cost me this night's work!"

He pulled her against him with savage strength. Her soft curls were crushed against his hard shoulder and she had a dizzy sensation of drowning as his face came down to hers, shutting out the winking stars.

His lips took hers completely, drew her very heart out of her until she lost all sense of time and space—knew only a wild, happy ecstasy. With a desperate sort of gladness, she responded to his lips, until the shadowy night around them was lost and all life was a kiss.

Then he dropped his arms and moved away. She watched him reach his horse, mount without looking back. Then she turned to stumble down the trail.

THERE was a quick, twisting pain in her, an engulfing feeling of something precious lost. She knew then that even when she was a white-haired old lady, the husky uncertainty of Vic's voice as he bent over her, believing her to be unconscious, would haunt her. She knew that his kiss had lit a blaze in her heart that could never be quenched, that it would rage until it burned out her very life. But by her own act of treachery, she had cast love out of her life for ever.

When she reached home, she wrote Leon a note, tucked it in her shirt pocket and slipped into the night. She must warn him of his danger. He had been her friend; and he still needed her help.

She would leave her message at their trysting place. Hurrying, sure-footed in her woven sandals, she reached the river, slid through the fence, was in Mexico. She headed swiftly and silently for the thick clump of willows that hid the adobe ruin.

As she stepped into the dense shadow she heard the rumble of voices. She stole nearer and her heart knotted in apprehension as she recognized Ed's growl. The other voice was Leon's.

Bonnie flattened herself against the crumbling wall. She could hear every word spoken. Ed had evidently reached the adobe ruin just ahead of her.

He was saying, "So I had to be extra careful crossing the border. Patrol's been snoopin' around." Then with harsh urgency, "The kid take the dope across?"

"Yes," Leon assured him. "She's easy to handle. But I want to tell you, Atbury, that Wyatt stopped her going over last night!"

"What the hell?" Ed exclaimed sharply. Then, "We'd better get rid of that young squirt. He was nosing around today on the other side of the river."

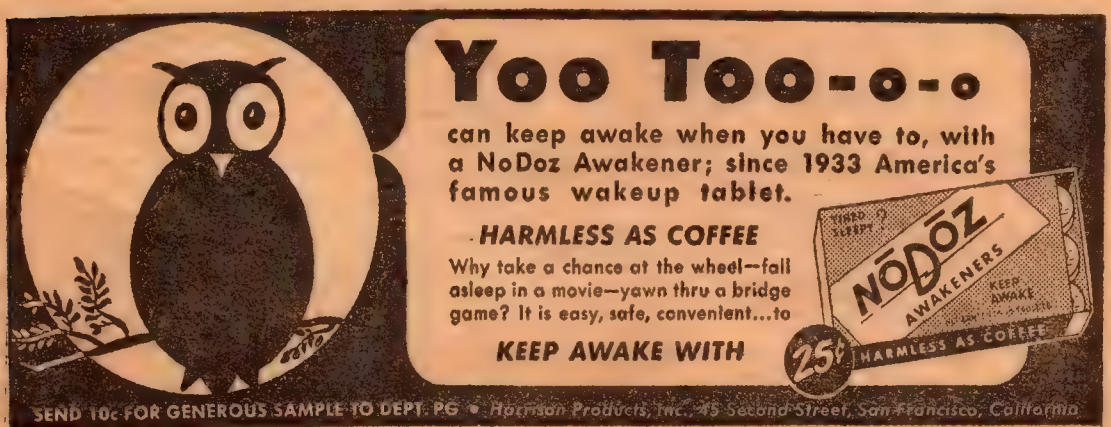
"I have thought out a plan," Leon replied. "Listen, Ed."

He lowered his voice, but through the sick horror of complete disillusionment, Bonnie heard and understood their plot. When Ed seemed about to leave, she slipped away. With the black wolves of stark terror biting at her heels, she fled home.

As she ran, the mocking, unfeeling voice that was the true Leon pursued her, asking Ed, "And when you skip the country, what about the girl?"

Her stepfather's heartless reply sounded her doom. "Oh, you can take her if you wish. She's getting to be a pest. Attractin' guys like that Wyatt."

"I'll take her off your hands then," Leon promised, "when tomorrow's busi-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ness is over and we aren't bothered by that Wyatt anymore."

Panting, each breath a painful sob, Bonnie reached home, crawled into her bed. The plot was diabolically simple. Vic would be tipped off to look for dope at the cave entrance, tomorrow evening. When he touched the pottery bowl planted there—a dynamite blast would be set off that would blow the handsome lawman to bits.

Ed had boasted, "The law won't have a thing on me. Got a right to blast those rocks out, haven't I? Got the whole place plastered with no-trespass signs, haven't I? And when the ruckus dies down, I'll just move along down the line somewhere."

Bonnie remembered everything she had heard. What *could* she do? Go to Vic and tell him the truth, every ghastly bit of it? Sparing nothing to show what a credulous little idiot she had been? She would do it in a minute, gladly bear his contempt.

But she also knew in her soul that he wouldn't believe a word of *anything* she said now.

Over and over again she could picture him climbing the steep trail, his tall, strong figure bent forward—forward to meet death. She could see him pick up that bowl, one so similar to the urn she'd so innocently carried there this evening. Then, the shattering blast that would tear the still night to shreds.

She dragged herself over to the window and looked past the starlit hills in the direction of Vic's home. He lived alone, she knew, in the ranchhouse his grandfather had built. Only last night he'd told her that she was pretty and sweet and attractive to men. That desperate men—that *any* man—would desire her youth and softness. She shuddered as she thought now of Leon and his feeling for her.

But Vic had said *any* man. Then how about him? He was so—so alone in his life. Even when he scorned her, hadn't he bent to kiss her while she pretended to faint? Didn't his heart pound like a wild thing as he held her close?

Bonnie knew now what she could do, the only chance she had to save Vic from the trap that would be set for him. She went back to wait, wide-eyed, for morning.

D STAYED home all morning, even though Bonnie was frantic for him to leave. Toward noon, he remarked that he was waiting for some dynamite from town. The box of dynamite came, and Ed left with a curt command for her to stay close to the house.

Clad in her worn sandals and patched overalls and shirt, Bonnie started over the hills to Vic Wyatt's house. Resolutely she walked up the stone-bordered walk knocked at the front door. There was no answer and she pushed the door open. Emptiness and silence were in the neat, lonely-looking rooms. She went in.

Her excited blue gaze darted eagerly around the homely furnishings. She felt too nervous to sit still, so she found dried apples, flour, lard, and salt, and set out to make a pie. She pinned a flour-sack around her to serve as an apron, and happily went to work. It was easy to day-dream as she rolled lard and flour together between her pink palms. What if she were Vic's bride and. . . .

The door opened into the kitchen and Bonnie spun about from the table, her heart racing.

"Oh!" It was a high, rising sound from Belle Connolly.

The blonde stood just inside the door, looking expensive and curvy and luscious. She held an envelope in her hand.

Belle broke the silence, her rounded eyes narrowing, her rounded mouth thinning. "I stopped by to leave a message for Mr. Wyatt." Her sharp gaze took in the flushed girl, the pie makings, the flour-sack apron. "You're working here?" she demanded.

Bonnie was surprised at the steadiness of her own reply. "No, just—visiting."

"Visiting?" Belle echoed blankly.

Bonnie smiled, a dimpling smile that curved her red lips back from small, even teeth.

"Would you like me to give Mr. Wyatt your message?" she asked politely.

Belle drew herself up. "No, thank you," she said haughtily. She flounced to the door, and went out.

As the door slammed, Bonnie's knees gave way, and she sank into a chair. Then she squared her jaw and went back to her pie-making. . . .

The pie was cool and the shadows in the yard were long when she saw Vic coming up the path. His wide shoulders drooped as though he were tired, and he wasn't whistling.

Bonnie opened the door. She was trembling wildly and her heart was pushing up into her throat, choking her. Vic stepped across the sill and stopped short, facing her. His eyes—those gun-metal gray eyes—narrowed and darkened, and his face went blank of expression. He came on in, tossed his hat to a chair, and pushed the door closed.

Bonnie stood her ground, her hand to her mouth, her blue eyes enormous.

"Where in hell have you been all day?" Vic demanded.

Bonnie answered in a fluttering gasp, "H-here."

He swore softly. Then with extreme patience, Vic asked, "Do you mind telling me *why* you were here?"

Bonnie began to shake. She twisted her hands together and looked down at them helplessly. Then she gulped, and with her eyes lowered, blurted out, "You s-said I was pretty the other night, and that any man would—would—lose his head over me. And . . . so . . ."

Her voice faded away, and she just stood there miserably, while the clock ticked loudly, and her heart kept time in slow, sickening blows, beating her pride into shreds. She stared hard at Vic's boots. Big, hot tears began to drop down on her hands, splash on the floor.

"I don't get it," he declared finally, "I don't get it at all."

"I g-guess I was crazy to imagine you'd want to see me," sobbed the girl wretchedly. "B-but I couldn't stay with Ed any longer and I didn't know where to go, and you did say—"

He moved close to her, put a firm hand under her chin, tilted it so that he could look into the wet blue eyes. *" 'Sta bueno.* So you want to stay here. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well," she said promptly. "I c-can cook and keep house and n-not annoy you, only—" desperation trembled through her voice—"only promise me that you'll not leave me, not for a minute, tonight!"

"Why?" he asked. "Why not leave for a minute tonight?"

"B-because I'm so afraid Ed will find me," Bonnie explained. She caught at his arm with both small hands. "Please believe me." Her voice quavered with sincerity.

"How do I know," demanded Vic, "that you aren't just trying to keep me safely out of the way while your gang of dope-runners pulls a big job? This sounds like one of your regular tricks."

"It isn't, oh, it isn't! Please believe me! Just for tonight!" Bonnie's very soul was in her eyes.

He looked down at her silently, and in the silence there was a rap on the door. He shoved her toward another room. "Get in there and stay quiet!" he murmured as he went to open the door and admit his visitor.

Bonnie leaned against the door, exhausted. She didn't know whether he believed her or not. She could tell nothing from his face. But she did know that with every moment that passed she loved him more deeply, that she'd keep him from going to his death that night if she had to cling to his boots.

From the other room came Vic's voice, and then that of another patrolman who was declaring with satisfaction, "Saw you ride in and followed you. Well, thanks to you, Vic, the whole gang is on the way to Nogales with the sheriff and his deputies."

Vic muttered something, and his visitor asked, "Find the girl?"

"She's all right, Jim," Vic assured him. "I found her. I'll see that she's taken care of."

"That's mighty good," Jim said heartily.

Bonnie let out a long-held breath as she heard the front door open.

"Well," Jim said, "I'll mosey on. You'll go into Nogales to make out the report tonight?"

"Right away, Jim. *Adios.*" Vic closed the front door.

"What did he mean about the *gang?*" Bonnie asked as she came out of the bedroom.

"Just that Jim and I and a couple of other patrolmen surprised them as they were setting their man-trap at the cave. The only thing that held us up was you."

(Please continue on page 98)

1876 For shindigs—yet simple to sew is this figure-flattering frock with high-fitted waist. Sizes 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20. Size 14, 4⅝ yards of 35 or 39-inch.

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The Spring and Summer FASHION offers a bonanza of sewing savvy for pretty summer wardrobes. Don't wait—send 25 cents today.

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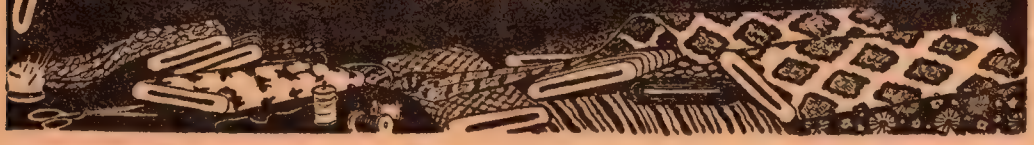

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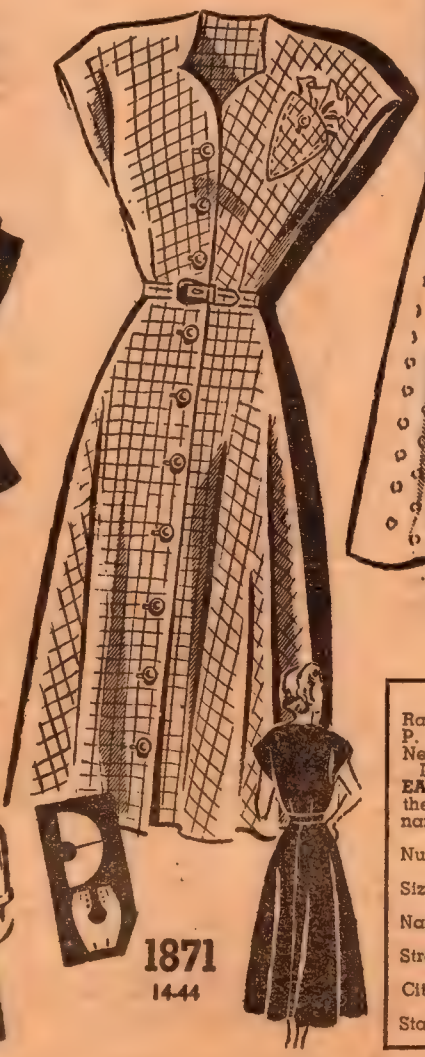

May, 1949

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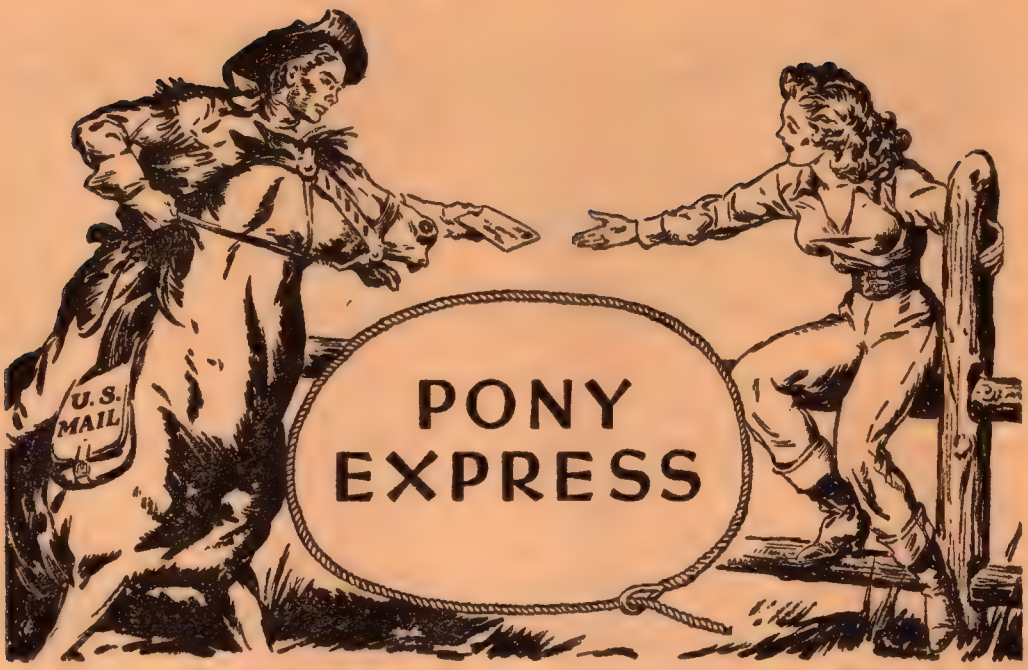

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Buenas dias, pards,

Gather right close around the hitching post. The Pony Express rider's coming in mighty fast now—and with a powerful big load of letters. Matter of fact, every month we sure get a big batch of mail from all you pen pals scattered throughout this wide world, and it just seems that we never get enough room to print as many of the interesting letters as we'd like to.

That's why this month we're printing a real bonanza of mail we've corraled here. You can bet we're mighty proud this pen pal column's so popular with you RANGELAND ROMANCES readers. Makes us feel we're doing our bit to spread friendship and happiness everywhere.

Now let's get to looking over your letters:

Try a Dejected Texican

Dear Editor:

Lost and Found? This is my $64.00 question, for I am lost, wandering aimlessly over desert and plain, through valleys and fields—hunting, yes, hunting for pen pals of all ages. Who will find me with their mail to fill an old empty, rusty mailbox?

I am single and middle-aged with a hobby of collecting Q.S.L. cards of amateur radio stations from all over the world. I like most every kind of music, ball games, and all sports.

Why not try me and see what the wheel of fortune has in store for you from a lonely one deep in the heart of Texas?

JIM GARRETT
P. O. Box 229
Cleburne, Texas

Wanda Wonders About Scribes

Dear Editor:

My main intention in writing this letter is to get introduced to boys and girls all over.

I am a young girl of 16 years, with brown curly hair. I am 5 ft. 6 in. tall, have dark blue eyes, and weigh 115 lbs. I live on a famous movie star's ranch. My hobbies are many—most interesting are Bible study, bowling, and ranch work.

I would like to challenge all boys to write. The first ones to write will receive a snapshot of me. I think girls are better at writing, but I would like to be sure. Are you boys going to let them beat you?

I promise to answer all letters I receive, so come on guys and gals, send this Texas gal some mail.

WANDA MAUDLIN
Thunderbird Ranch
Box 45, Route 1
Coachella, Calif.

College Lad From India

Dear Editor:

I am very eager to have as many friends as possible. I am a boy of 18 years, 5 ft. 4 in. tall. I am studying the principles of commerce in one of the colleges here. My ambition is to go to foreign lands and see the interesting sights—my hobby is writing to foreign friends. I can give full description about the present conditions in India.

Bezwada is on the river Krish. I have a few snaps of the river. My favorite languages are four of the Indian dialects.

Won't you write to an Indian boy who is crying for friends? I have pen pals in New Zealand but I wish to widen my circle of pen pals. I'll answer all letters that I receive and I have no limits as to age.

VASUDERARAO CHALLAPALLI
Santivihar
Singarajn Sari Stmeet
Kottapeta
Bezwada, South India

Lizzy's no Tenderfoot

Dear Editor:

How's about pullin' leather on them high-strung, stampedin' Pony Express critters long enough to drop off a few pen pals? Thanks!

Here's a real-type Western gal all tucked away in the foothills of the most "Westernest" state in the forty-eight—good ole Washington. I'm a comin' on high lope just a faggin' the breeze with a widely flung lariat, rarin' to roundup all you cowtown guys and gals.

Have just topped 20 years young. I have light brown hair, steel-gray eyes and weigh 145 lbs. I unfold a short height of 5 ft. 8½ in. tall. I love the outdoors and almost any sport you can name. My favorite pastimes are readin', writin', ridin' an' singin'. I play and sing to my guitar and have written many songs. I collect postage stamps, horse statuettes and drawings, scenic postcards and cowboy songs.

I'm just crazy about horses, especially buckskins, sorrels and palominos. I hope someday to own and operate a dude ranch in Wyoming or Montana, or maybe Texas. Being a telephone operator at present, I meet and talk to all kinds of people. What could be more interesting?

I'm no greenhorn at ranch work either. Calf wrestling an' throwing are my chief pet peeves —especially when the calf's expectin' it!

So come on all you cowgals and unbranded mavericks and servicemen. There's no age limit, but fellows from 20 to 30 are welcome. I'll be a'leanin' on the ole toprail beside the mailbox waitin' for y'all to write. Please send me a snap of yourself. Adios—amigos.

ELIZABETH ANN JOHNSTON
PO box 67
Hoodsport, Washington

Welcome From Tahiti

Dear Editor:

How about letting a Chinese girl from Tahiti crash the Pony Express? I would very much like to have lots of pen pals. I come from a colorful and interesting place and have plenty of time to write.

I am 19, lively and full of fun. I have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I stand 5 ft. 9 in. tall. I love to dance, swim, read and laugh, and collect movie-star pictures. Music is my special favorite hobby.

I'd appreciate letters from pen pals all over the world. So come on boys and girls, don't let me down. Please send me a snapshot with your pictures—I'll return one of myself.

CELESTINE LAI
Alturoa-Raiatea
Iles-Sous-Le Vent
Papeete, Tahiti

Rarin' to Write

Dear Editor:

So many times I've tried to get into the Pony Express that I've lost count. I hope you can find a little room for me to squeeze in now.

I am 17 years old and have blue-green eyes and light brown hair with a red shine to it. I am 5 ft. 8 in. tall. Some people say I'm pretty—others think twice before they speak. I have a good sense of humor, too good at times.

Especially I would like to hear from cowboys and all service men. I'll try to answer all letters, those with snaps first. Come on everybody and don't disappoint me.

BARBARA ANSPAUGH
Box 661
Mullan, Idaho

Relief for a Bachelor

Dear Editor:

If it will ever get printed, here is my attempt at introduction to readers of Pony Express. Hair, brown; eyes, brown; weight, 175 lbs.; height 5 ft. 10 in.; age, 30 years.

I like to use a camera and will exchange snapshots with the first 20 to answer my letters. I play the violin and mandolin. Also I like to draw, paint and illustrate.

I'm a single home-owner and would like to hear from a whole multitude of Pony Express enthusiasts, preferable women, of course. I'm growing tired of "batching". Maybe some brave reader with the spirit of the true West will help me end my bachelor status.

HELMER SUNDSTROM
550 Standpipe Road
Carlsbad, New Mexico

Glamour-Bound Gloria

Dear Editor:

I am 14½ years old, have dark brown hair, blue eyes, and am 5 ft. 4 in. tall.

My hobbies are mostly outdoor sports, but best of all I like to sing and dance. In fact, some day I hope to become a singer and dancer.

How about dropping me a line, especially boys and girls from foreign countries? The age does not matter, so start them rolling.

GLORIA VAN DOREN
P. O. Box 117
Fife Lake, Mich.

Shipload of Mail-Lubbers

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for pen pals. I'm a lonesome sailor out here in China and would like to have plenty of mail. There are about 22 other fellows here on the ship who are the same way. They kind of made me spokesman for the whole gang. We won't put down descriptions of all hands as that would take too much time. I'll put my description down and my address, and maybe that will help a little.

I'm 18 years old, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, weigh 140 lbs. I have dark blue eyes and dark brown hair. I'm a Buckeye from Ohio and I like singing, reading and writing letters.

Come one, come all. Here are 23 lonesome sailors just waiting for a lot of letters. Just send them all to my address and I'll promise you'll get an answer from one sailor, maybe more.

LEON C. CROTHERS S2
U.S.S. LCI(L) 1092
c/o F.P.O., San Francisco, Calif.

Brown-Eyed Ruth

Dear Editor:

Hope you can find a little room in the Pony Express for a 22-year-old college girl. I have brown hair, brown eyes, am 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh 115 lbs.

I like fishing, dancing and horseback riding. Mornings, I go to commercial college, and I work sometimes in the afternoons.

I would like to receive cards and letters from people all over the world. Partially crippled by infantile paralysis, I cannot do things like other people do. Please write to a lonesome girl.

RUTH ANDERSON
Route 1
Detroit, Texas

Gregarious Gilda and Amber

Dear Editor:

We are a couple of females in search of pen pals, because we love to write letters.

We are both 17 years of age. Amber is blonde-haired and has green eyes. She stands about 5 ft. 6½ in. tall.

Gilda is dark-haired and has brown eyes. She is about 5 ft. 5½ in. tall.

We promise to answer each and every letter and send pictures to the first 15 who write—providing they have enclosed one of themselves. We know Kansas is windy, but couldn't you other states be just as windy and blow a few letters this way?

AMBER O'HARA
and
GILDA MONROE
Rozel, Kansas

Ash-Blonde and Artistic, Too!

Dear Editor:

Whoa up there! Please print my plea for pen pals. I am a very lonesome cowgal from Montana, and a long ways from home. I would like very much to make some friends through the Pony Express. Here's hoping I can crash its gates.

I am 19 years old, have ash-blonde hair, changeable blue-green eyes, weigh 119 lbs, am 5 ft. 4 in. tall. My friends say I am pretty and have a pleasing personality. My nationality is Irish, English, and French.

A bit old fashioned, I don't smoke, drink, curse or swear. I like all artistic things, and good clean fun. My hobbies are horseback riding, drawing Western pictures, hiking, taking snaps, going to Western dances, and sewing.

Although we spend much of our time on our ranch, we did get to travel a bit, but I still didn't get to see as much of the country as I would like to see. Someday, I would like to visit all of the beautiful places in the U.S., Canada, and old Mexico.

I just love excitement and adventure, but am somewhat the domestic type. I love to cook up good Western dishes, and make Western shirts. I try to keep my two big brothers outfitted fairly well.

I find studying human nature pretty interesting and I like to read stories, discuss them with my friends and exchange views. I come from a literary family and am interested in writing, but so far no luck.

I'll write and exchange views with all of you cowgals and cowboys who write—or anyone else between the ages of 15 to 29 who has the same ideas of fun that I do. I will draw a sketch and send a snap to the first 20 who write. Send a snap in the first letter, please, and I will too.

JOYCE FLAGG
Box 1263.
San Fernando, Calif.

A Right Guy

Dear Editor:

I sure would like to hear from you gals between the ages of 20 to 39.

I live on the farm and get pretty lonesome—so please write, all you girls who neither smoke nor drink hard liquor. I'm 38 years old, 5 ft. 11 in. tall, weight 175 lbs. and have brown eyes and hair. Have lived in Oklahoma all my life. My favorite sports are fishing, hunting, horseshoe pitching, reading, and many others.

Come on and write me, and I promise to answer all of you.

WILBUR C. KEHN
Route 1, Box 158
Isabella, Okla.

Jaunty Outdoor Gals

Dear Editor:

We are a couple of Arkansas gals roaming in the foothills of the Ozarks. We like all outdoor sports, especially hiking and swimming.

Betty Lou is 17 years old, has blonde hair and green eyes. She is 5 ft. 4½ in. tall and weighs 120 lbs.

Artie Faye is almost 16 years old, has brown hair, brown eyes, weighs 115 lbs., and is 5 ft. 7½ in. tall.

We will be expecting a lot of letters.

BETTY LOU McMURRAY
and
ARTIE FAYE REEVES
P.O. Box 21
Pleasant Grove, Arkansas

Lucky Joe

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get in the Pony Express, and I feel lucky this time.

I am 18 years of age, 5 ft. 7 in. in height, and weigh 145 lbs. I have dark brown hair and brown eyes.

My favorite pastimes are riding horses, playing football, writing songs and letters.

I would like to hear from both boys and girls of all ages. I will exchange snapshots.

JOE WITT
Route No. 1
Mitchelville, Tenn.

Blonde Tenderfoot

Dear Editor:

This is my third letter to the Pony Express, but if this goes on forever, I'll never give up.

Here's my description: I have blonde hair, and blue-gray eyes. My height is 5 ft. 2 in. and I weigh around 105 lbs. I was 16 in the swoonful month of August—the 4th day.

I'm not beautiful and I am definitely not ugly, as my pictures will prove. I am nutty about the West and am planning to run a dude ranch someday. I love to read Western books. "Twilight on the Trail" is my favorite Western song.

I would like to hear from people living in Texas, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, and Montana especially, but everyone is welcome.

SERENA MARKS
R. F. D. No. 2
Sunbury, Pa.

Tony's a Young Tyke

Dear Editor:

To describe myself, I will put myself in someone else's shoes.

They would find that I'm 13 years, blonde with green-gray eyes, 5 ft. tall, weigh 105 lbs. I'm part English, Indian, Irish, and Scotch. I dress mostly in red, white, black and green.

I like swimming and croquet and writing. My nickname is "Tony". I hope this description will bring results.

Sylvia Dolores Wheeler
General Delivery
Crescent City, Fla.

Yolanda of the Orient

Dear Editor:

Could you put my plea for pen pals in your Pony Express column?

I am 21 years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weigh 110 lbs., with fair complexion. Would like to hear from others interested in house decoration and color schemes. Sports, such as tennis, swimming, and softball, are my sporting side. Would exchange photo, newspapers, and things of interest.

So how about helping a girl who is lonely in so far a land?

YOLANDA FRANCES
No. 2 Salisbury Ave.
Kowloon, Hong Kong
China

Swabbie's SOS

Dear Editor:

I am stationed on Guam aboard the USS Never-Sail, and have plenty of time to write letters, so I would like to hear from all you gorgeous girls between the ages of 16 and 25. It doesn't make any difference whether you live in Alaska, Brooklyn, or Death Valley, because I have been to all three. Music is my hobby.

I have blue eyes, blond hair, and stand 5 ft. 7 in. tall. I work in the office of the Naval Air Terminal. I will be glad to exchange photos with anyone. Just address your letters, along with a picture to—

WILLIAM ELY
NAS-VR-6
Navy 943

Squib From Small-fry

Dear Editor:

I am wondering if a small guy, 14 years old, with brown hair and blue eyes, in the 9th grade, could catch the Pony Express.

I hope all you fellows and girls will write—mostly girls—and I will answer quicker than quick.

JIMMY ADAMSON
Route 4
Bowdon, Ga.

(Please continue on page 92)

Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS

You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families—that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least *one out of every three persons* examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy is **Jayne's P-W Vermifuge** developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for P-W, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.

Just Remember: P-W ® for Pin-Worms

Rollicking Pioneer Novelette

♥ ♥

By Diane Austin

♥

CHAPTER ONE

Kissing Ideas

BINNIE had kept her slightly freckled nose pressed against the stagecoach window nearly all the way from Cactus Springs, and it was still flattened there when the wheels finally stopped their clatter in Junction Center. And so she had no one to blame but herself for the fact that she was the last passenger to alight.

She gave her dark green traveling skirt a preparatory little shake, and had just finished tying her bonnet strings into

Binnie meant business—
whether she was running her stagecoach
or a-running after her . . .

DEAREST

She said: "I'm the new stagecoach hostess. . . . Pile in, boys!"

COWBOY ENEMY

a hurriedly rakish bow under her chin, when a man's voice distinctly said:

"You aimin' to stay the night in there, ma'am?"

Of all the brass! "It was bad enough I had to spend most of the day!" Binnie snapped.

She stooped in the stage doorway, one trimly shod foot groping out for the depot landing, when she felt strong hands being planted on her waist. The next moment, she was swung free of the coach and onto the board-planked platform.

"I reckon that was what you were waitin' for, wasn't it?" he spoke again.

For answer, Binnie dug her fingernails into the hands still indenting her waist, and was promptly rewarded by a sudden yelp of pain, as well as the freedom of standing on her own too feet.

"*That* was what I was waiting for," she said with satisfaction. "And now if you'll—"

She got no further, for in the course of her speech her gaze had swept upward, and there it had encountered a tongue-holding sight.

Even in the dimness of twilight, Binnie could recognize a good-looking hombre when she saw one. And right now, she was seeing one. Dark brown hair that waved in a boyish sort of crest; a weather-tanned, nicely-planed face; a mouth that would give any girl kissing ideas—and eyes of a surprisingly deep-hued blue. He wore the usual dusty range clothes of a cowhand—but oh, how he wore them!

Mmmmm, thought Binnie. And then, for good measure, *mmmmm, mmmmm.*

"If I'll what?" said the man.

Belatedly, she remembered the sentence she had left dangling. Binnie smiled. A slow, calculatedly tantalizing smile that would have taffied up an old catawampus.

"I—I had two carpetbags along," she said in pretty confusion.

"They've been unloaded," he told her, nodding toward the pair of them not ten feet away on the landing. "While you were working' yourself up into a verbal lather."

Binnie stiffened. Handsome was as handsome treated a lady, she reminded herself. With a disdainful toss of her honey-blonde curls she marched over to her bags.

The clump-clump of booted feet followed here. "You're a stranger in town," he said matter-of-factly. "Could be you don't know sic 'em about where the hotel's at."

"Could be," she agreed, not looking at him.

Before she could stop him, he had picked up a carpetbag in either hand, and was swinging them back and forth as if they had been packed with feathers—instead of Binnie's every stitch and possession in the world, that she had toted along with her from the ranch.

"Two ways of gettin' to the hotel from here," he went on. "One way, the wagon picks you up and—"

"Where can I find the wagon?" Binnie asked immediately.

He said, "Right along here," and proceeded off, down the landing and around the corner of the stage depot.

There was a wagon there, sure enough, drawn by a couple of reddish-chestnut bays that were impatiently pawing the muddy ground. No driver, though, was in view.

Binnie hadn't time even to put her question into words. The man said, "Me," and quickly hoisted her bags into the back of the wagon.

"You climbin' up under your own steam?" he asked next.

Binnie thought of the snug way his hands had fitted her waist, and decided not to risk it again. She raised her skirt, and managed to clamber up onto the front seat, conscious all the while of the sudden downward swoop of the stranger's bold glance on her.

He came around to the other side, and boosted himself up beside her. Deftly he picked up the reins and adjusted them.

"Git," he clucked.

The chestnuts left off stomping the ground, and they were on their way. Binnie sat back gingerly. Up ahead there was nothing to look at but a cloud of dust. She turned her head to one side, away from the driver.

"Nice town," she said after a while, though in the deepening dusk she could only make out the shadowy wooden shapes of some houses and stores, and scattered trees.

"Good enough," he returned shortly.

SHE'D darn well let him be the one to open up next time, she told herself. But after fifteen minutes of listening to the unexciting sounds of the horses' hooves and the rumbling of the wagon wheels over the rough dirt road, she relented. "Reckon I'm gonna like it here?" she asked softly, and now she turned to look at him once more.

She had expected to see the sharp outline of his profile, but instead, he was staring at her, too, and their gazes met squarely.

"Whoa!" he called to the horses, and the wagon came to a stop.

He didn't even let go of the reins. He just put his arms around her, slid her over to him, and settled his mouth on hers, but firmly. The second's hesitation before he actually kissed her, was to Binnie an aching eternity.

The kiss itself was another eternity—but not the aching kind at all.

He let her go. His blue eyes melted down into hers, and, for the first time, he smiled.

"I reckon you're gonna love it here," he said.

Which is what I deserve for asking, Binnie thought dizzily, as he clucked again to the horses and they started up once more. She tried to think of something, anything, to say but the moon had risen by now and was silvering the night with its magic, and somehow, the time didn't seem ripe for conversation.

And so they rattled on. . . .

"Here we are," he said at last. "Junction Center's one and only hotel."

Binnie blinked. They were halted in front of a three-story framework building. The wooden sign precariously nailed above the entrance did indeed proclaim it to be the *Hotel.*

He jumped down from his seat, and came around to help her out. Then he reached in back for the carpetbags.

"I'll just haul these inside for you."

"Thank you," Binnie said as coolly as she could. She took but two steps forward, and then she froze.

For, facing her, to the left of the hotel, was another structure. A smaller, narrower structure, plainly labeled by its own board sign: *Stage Depot.*

"You—you double-dyed sidewinder!" Binnie sputtered, suddenly mad enough to kick a hog bare-footed. "How dare you take me wagon-riding all over creation, when I could have plumb well walked here in half-a-dozen steps!"

The man laughed, plainly unimpressed by her rage. "Told you there were two ways of getttin' to the hotel," he said. "Walkin' was the other way."

He took a firmer grip on her bags and strode inside. Helplessly, Binnie could only follow.

"Lady wants a room," he was telling the clerk. "Needn't be a fancy one. She loves it here already."

He turned to Binnie. "Nice to have kissed you," he said. "I'll be seein' you around."

And with that, he strode right out again.

Binnie stamped her foot. And then aware that the gesture had had no effect other than further delighting the already pop-eyed clerk, she exclaimed sharply:

"Well, don't just stand there, you galoot! I want a room—and the best in the house!"

The room he showed her to, if the best in the hotel, was no flattering comment on the others. But Binnie was only too grateful to lock herself in and go speedily to bed. . . .

The next morning, refreshed by her night's sleep, and comfortably rigged out in jeans and a bright plaid shirt, Binnie was ready to go to work. After a hasty breakfast in the hotel's dining room, she confronted the desk clerk.

"Where can I find the stage depot?" she asked him.

"Next door," he told her smugly, as if its location were a little convenience arranged for the guests of the hotel.

Binnie sighed. "Not *that* one, you oaf," she said. "The *other* one."

"Other one?" echoed the clerk. For a moment he regarded her, plainly puzzled, and then his sallow face lit up. "You mean Miss Howard's Folly?"

Her eyes widened, but she nodded.

The clerk directed her. "Turn right when you get outside. It's down to the other end of town. Can't miss it." He leaned over the desk. "Won't get very far if you're figgerin' on goin' anyplace—"

"Thank you," she cut him, and left the hotel at a brisk pace.

Her route took her past the depot where she had arrived the evening before. Binnie fixed her gaze straight ahead, but she couldn't help wondering if the wagon driver—or whatever he was—was around. She held her blonde head high as she ambled past the windows of the depot office, and felt a strange sense of disappointment when she had left the building behind . . . safely.

JUNCTION CENTER, she noticed as she walked along, was evidently more than just a piddlin'-sized cowtown. It was the focal point of the surrounding mining and cattle ranching areas, for the various stores and entertainment halls on the main street showed the trimmings and trappings of those occupations. Her aunt had written her about these places so many times, Binnie didn't feel as though she were seeing them all for the first time.

The folks she passed along the way—the mining men, ranchers, cowhands, and a few early-marketing women—glanced at her with open curiosity, but she kept on resolutely.

Her destination proved to be a thoroughly run-down and ramshackle affair at its best. The stage depot, which was nothing more than a shack, was covered with months-old accumulated dust and dirt.

The windows—those that weren't just cracked and shattered—were cloudy with grime. The wooden landing platform consisted of two gaping holes for every remaining plank, and the ground around grew choking-thick with weeds and straggling brush.

Binnie surveyed the scene with a sinking heart. So this—this ruin was her inheritance. This scarecrow of a building was the sum total of the wordly possessions her Aunt Eliza had left to her; for which she had said good-by to her ranch home and come traipsing out here to claim. *The Howard Stage Company* was the way the will had read. Binnie shook her head mournfully. *Miss Howard's Folly* was indeed more like it.

And then, on the cobweb-blanketed front door, she spied what appeared to be some sort of paper. She stepped closer. Someone had tacked up a crudely printed notice:

HOWARD STAGE COMPANY

Owner—Eliza Howard
Inquire at Cemetery

Manager—Scott Barnes
Inquire at The Black Ace

"Doesn't give you much of a choice, does it?" a voice said from behind her. "A lady like you wouldn't exactly hanker to be found dead in either place."

Binnie whirled. She might have known he would be bulging up on her again, she thought dimly.

"Clerk at the hotel told me where you were headin'," he went on placidly. He looked around at the dilapidation which confronted them. "I'd say this was hardly the right place to begin your sight-seein' at."

"I'd say it was none of your business," Binnie retorted. And just then, to her confronted them. "I'd say this was hardly her eyes. In another second, one big fat drop was careening down her cheek.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, fumbling in his shirt pocket. "Gosh a'mighty, don't do that, ma'am."

He found his handkerchief, extended it to her, and Binnie took it and dabbed awkwardly at her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed. "It was just—just that seeing my stage company like—like this—and—and . . ."

"*Your* stage company?"

Binnie nodded. "My—my Aunt Eliza left it to me. I'm Binnie Howard."

He let out a long whistle. "Binnie Howard," he repeated.

"What did happen here, anyway?" Binnie asked. "Do you know?"

"Kind of a long story," he said. "Let's set a spell."

They cleared off a space on one of the more solid portions of the landing, and sat down. Binnie looked up at him, expectantly.

"Your aunt, Miss Eliza," he began, "started the company about four years ago. She'd had a long-time feud on with the owner of the town's stage line, and when one of her mine holdings made her

some money, she used it to go into competition with him."

Binnie was puzzled. "You don't call *this* competition, do you?"

"Well, it wasn't always like this," he said. "At first, with two stagecoaches, your aunt managed to do a fair-sized business, carrying' passengers and freight between here and Cactus Springs, and also travelers from the East who have to transfer at Junction Center for places farther West. She had hired good drivers, and her manager practically ran the line for her." He added, in an oddly flat tone of voice, "Name's Scott Barnes."

"Then what happened?" she asked suspiciously.

He hunched forward, not looking at her. "Luke Martin, who owned the first stage company, set out to destroy her—or so Miss Eliza claimed to her dyin' day. Her coaches were held up on the road, the passengers were relieved of their valuables, and any cargo bein' carried was also stolen. Got so, pretty soon there was no one fool enough to ride with Miss Eliza's line, and they never did catch up with the bandit responsible." He waved a hand back toward the weather-beaten shack. "You see the result for yourself."

Binnie stood up. "Where can I find that Luke Martin?" she demanded.

"Not a stone's throw from Miss Eliza." He rose, too, leisurely. "He died a month after she did. His son Clay runs the line now. I guess you know it's the one you blew in on."

But she wasn't to be turned aside so easily. "Scott Barnes," she continued. "Where's he at?"

He smiled. "You can read the sign."

Binnie didn't like that smile. It added fuel to the fire of her suspicions.

"I reckon at this moment he's not at The Black Ace, whatever that is," she said slowly. "I reckon he's right here—talking to me!"

He said, "The Black Ace is a gamblin' hole. An' so you think I'm Scott Barnes, do you?"

"I reckon."

He threw back his head, and his laughter came hearty and full. "Worse than than," he said, still chuckling. "My name's Clay Martin!"

At first, Binnie didn't grasp the significance of what he had just said. And then its meaning seeped into her consciousness. He was Clay Martin! The son of the man who had driven her aunt out of business!

"Varmint!" she gritted at him. "You no-good paper-backed coyote!"

"I'm loco about you, too," he said happily. "Kiss me."

"I'd sooner kiss a jackrabbit!" she cried.

Binnie turned to run. The faster she fogged it away from him, the better. But he started right after her. She expected to be overtaken momentarily, when she heard a loud tearing crash behind her, and the thud of a heavily falling body.

She stopped, looked around. Clay Martin had apparently caught his boot heel in one of the jagged plank holes, and was now clumsily sprawled out on the landing platform. Binnie hesitated. Maybe he had hurt himself.

And then he propped himself on his elbows, and grinned up at her—just like a jackass eating cactus, Binnie found herself thinking.

"Care to join me?" he asked. "We could talk this way real cozy-like."

"I hope you rot there!" Binnie flung at him, and again turned to be off.

NOW, however, she herself was stopped. Not by a dangerous plank, not even by Clay—but by bumping headlong into a black-and-white checked shirt. A shirt that was on a decidedly masculine form, and a form that was topped off by a quite admirable face and a shock of the reddest hair Binnie had ever seen.

The newcomer gripped her arms to steady her. "Me too," he said pleasantly. "I hope the buzzards come to pick at his bones."

Binnie said nothing, just looked at him. And at that moment, Clay came up to them, brushing the dust off his clothes.

"Speakin' of buzzards," he drawled, "this here red-headed one's Scott Barnes. Me and him get along like two bobcats in a gunny sack."

The other man ignored him. "You're Binnie Howard, Miss Eliza's niece, aren't you?" he said warmly. "She told me about

you heaps of times. I just heard from the hotel clerk that you were in town."

Binnie dislodged her arms, smiled at him. "I was just on my way to find you," she said. "Where can we talk?"

"Over a deck of cards, if you'll sit in a couple hands with him," Clay said.

Scott glared at him. "Shut up, Martin. What Binnie's got to say to me doesn't concern you."

"I've got a mighty peculiar feelin' it does," Clay said. He wiggled his fingers at them. "I'll be amblin' along anyways. Got plenty of business to attend to over at my stage line."

Binnie couldn't help but resent the jibe. But she'd be putting a spoke in Clay Martin's wheel soon enough, she told herself. And so she let her answering smile be one of her sweetest.

"'By," she murmured. And then, to Scott, "We can talk right here now that the air's been cleared."

"A pleasure, ma'am," the redhead assured her. "Allow me to show you inside."

Clay had already strolled off a distance, but now he turned and hollered back at them, in so raucous a voice that Binnie was sure half the town of Junction Center must have heard him:

"Don't count on gettin' the drop on her, Barnes. The lady's got a honin' for jackrabbits!"

Binnie's eyes flashed furious flame, but she grimly set her lips and followed Scott up on the landing where he was busy jiggling a rusty key in the door lock.

He laughed hollowly. "Been a long time," he commented unnecessarily.

At last, in an eerie chorus of creaks and groans, the heavy door swung inward. Scott stepped back to let Binnie enter. On the threshold, though, she stopped with a loud exclamation. What had once been the office of the Howard Stage Company, was now an indescribably filthy room whose dirt-layered interior and musty odors assailed Binnie's every sense.

"What a mess!" she said, in understatement.

Scott shrugged. "You can thank the Martins for this. Miss Eliza never came down here after her coaches had to stop runnin'."

Binnie said, "I don't blame her."

She began to walk around the office, poking into corners, examining the few pieces of shabby furniture, trying to visualize the place as it must have looked when the stage line had been in its heyday.

"Scott," she said finally, with an air of great decision. "How'd you like to come back to work as manager of a stage line?"

He appeared uncertain for a moment, as if trying to make up his mind whether she were jesting with him or not. And then his mouth quirked into the semblance of a grin.

"Shucks, Binnie," he said. "I never did quit."

"Fine." She nodded, her mind still racing to organize the desperate, foolhardy thoughts that were crying for recognition.

"We're going to fix this place up," she went on firmly. "We're going to hire us some drivers, and get the coaches—" She glanced up at Scott. "The coaches are still around somewheres, aren't they?" she asked a little fearfully.

Scott said, "They've been collectin' dust down to Old Man Hawkins' Livery Stable. Some repairs'll be in order likely, but we'll be able to use 'em."

"Good," said Binnie. "You can put a notice in the local newspaper then that we'll open for business two weeks from today!"

Her manager shook his head. "That's mighty tough goin' you've cut out for us, gal, but—" he reached for her hand, squeezed it— "we'll do it all right!"

Hastily, Binnie withdrew her fingers. "Uh, Scott," she said hesitantly, "you understand that our relationship is to be purely business? Like it was with you and my aunt."

"Of course I understand," he said promptly.

But he didn't at all, for without warning, his arm encircled her waist and he swung her toward him. The kiss that he put on her lips was heavy with longing.

Binnie wrenched herself free. Her eyes narrowed. "I reckon you'd best be on your way to that newspaper," she said. "I'll start in with the cleaning here."

He jumped down from his desk roost, waved her a jaunty salute, and was gone. Binnie sighed. But there was no use

bothering her head about him now. Or even about Clay Martin, she reminded herself sternly. They were two jaspers cut from the same cloth, and which, if either, was suited to her—was of no account or importance. She had a job to do now, and two weeks only in which to accomplish it!

For the next ten days it seemed as though Binnie's work would never be done. She scrubbed and swept and polished and painted the depot office until it looked almost decent again. Then scrubbed, swept, polished and painted it again, until, with the addition of new windows, it was fit for use. She persuaded Old Man Hawkins to let her have the coaches at only half their storage charges; then smiled at him a second time, and watched him tear up the bill.

She sailed around town with Scott and purchased horses, trappings, buckets of paint, and other necessary provisions from the general store—all on credit. The redhead helped her locate the men who had driven for her aunt, and she hired them back again at twice their former salary—to be paid them soon as, if and when the new stage company struck pay dirt. She inserted several other notices in the newspaper, too, though Scott stared at her as if she had gone completely haywire. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Designed to Please

TWO mornings before the deadline she had set for herself, everything was in readiness. Exhausted but happy, Binnie dropped into a chair, and took in her shining, spic-and-span office with gloating triumph. She was seeing not only the room, but the freshly painted and reupholstered coaches which waited outside; the sleek, sturdy horses; the leathery, bone-seasoned drivers; and—

The lowdown, black-hearted hombre who had just stepped through the door!

"Howdy," said Clay Martin, doffing his big hat. "Maybe you could tell me, ma'am, where I might be findin' the boss of this here spread."

Binnie was too contended to mind the thrust. "You here again?" she asked.

Many was the time Clay had come calfin' around during the past days. Always whistling or humming as if he were the most innocent of onlookers; but all the while alert and watchful, Binnie knew, for whatever crumbs of information he could sweep up as to her doings.

"Place looks mighty duded up," he said, peering around. "You gonna take in sewin' here, or somethin'?"

"Could be," Binnie murmured, refusing to rise to the bait.

"I figgered so," said Clay. "It's right up Scott Barnes' arroyo."

Binnie smiled at him. "What's the matter, Clay?" she taunted. "You a-feared of some honest-to-goodness competition? Reckon the town's not big enough for two stage lines, maybe?"

"Maybe." But he said it kind of tightly. "Look, Binnie, I just don't want to see you get hurt, that's all. It pretty durn near killed Miss Eliza, seein' her company go to ruin, and—well, I just don't want to see you get hurt," he finished lamely.

She jumped up. "It was your father and you ruined my aunt, and you know it, Clay Martin!" she cried. "You and your hired bandits! Well, I'm not afraid of *anything* you can do to me! Anything at all!"

He didn't say another word. Just stood there, looking at her with a queer intentness that rooted her to the spot—and prevented her from making any move against his next action.

With a harshly muttered oath, he strode over to her. Vise-like hands pinned her arms to her sides, and his lips took hers in a rush of blazing fury.

But somehow, there on her mouth, the fury softened to a delicious, burning closeness, and the closeness overcame her with its intensity . . . and then she was all at once kissing him back with the same frightening urgency.

He let her go abruptly. She backed tremulously away from him, her breath coming in quick spurts.

"So you're not afraid of anythin' I can do to you," he repeated softly. He left her there, his receding footsteps taking their astounding toll of her pounding heartbeats.

Scott came in. "I saw Martin ridin'

away," he said quickly. "Was he makin' any trouble?"

Binnie said, "What?"

"I said—was he tryin' to start a ruckus?"

"I wish I knew," she said, as if to herself. "That man gives me the gallopin' buck fever, for sure." And then, businesslike in manner once more, "Scott, did you give the paper the latest notice?"

The redhead chuckled. "Who in tarnation ever heard of a stagecoach line being given a house-warmin'? Don't worry, Binnie," as he caught her frown, "I put in the notice. The whole blamed town'll probably turn out for it, too. Just give 'em a shindig where the food and liquor's come by free."

Who had ever heard of a stagecoach line being given a housewarming, Scott had asked. Binnie wasn't sure of the answer to that one, but she did know that she was determined to show folks a thing or two at this party. A thing or two that would pay dividends in her business! . . .

She dressed carefully for the affair the next evening. There was a peach satin gown that she had ordered from Kansas City and had brought along with her from the ranch, where she had never had a chance to wear it. It embraced her smooth shoulders just low enough, and hugged her waist, and fell from there to the floor in soft, shimmering folds. She piled her blonde hair high along the sides of her head, but let it cascade down her back.

And when she critically surveyed the result in her hotel room mirror, Binnie decided, with justification, that she was the prettiest stagecoach-line owner in all of Junction Center.

The party was held right there at the depot. The office served as the refreshments room, while the night-roofed surrounding land outside made as fine and as spacious a ballroom as any. The fiddlers sawed out their sprightly tunes from their box seats on the landing, and couples danced and strolled under the star-speckled sky.

CORDIALLY Binnie greeted the townspeople and made them welcome. She danced with miners, ranchers and cowpokes alike, and soon found she was having a right high-heeled time at her own party. Scott claimed her as his partner as often as he could get through the crowd around her.

"When are you gonna make the announcement?" he whispered once.

"Soon," she said. "Soon as more people get here." But she could tell she hadn't fooled Scott. He was as aware as she that Clay Martin hadn't yet come moseyin' around.

Then she did see Clay. He was leaning against one of the posts of the corral where the horses were kept, and when she met his blue eyes she had the distinct feeling that they had been watching her for a long time.

She went over to him. "How do you like my stagecoach line warming, Clay?" she asked lightly.

"Tell you later, beautiful," he said. "When you start shootin' off your surprises."

"Stand by for both barrels then," she warned. Still lightly, she asked, "Aren't you dancing?"

He slanted a lazy grin at her. "Why so het up about it?" he drawled. "I've held you in my arms before."

She might have known he'd take it that way! Furiously, Binnie turned from him, and went off in search of Scott.

"Now's the time," she told her manager. "Pronto!"

"Hope you know what you're doing, Binnie," he mumbled. But he walked on up to the landing platform, and silenced the fiddlers.

"Ladies and gents," he said to the crowd now gathering in front of the platform. "As you all know, Binnie Howard's stagecoach company will resume operation tomorrow. But now here's someone who's gonna tell you a few details you *don't* know about Junction Center's new travelin' line. Ladies and gents—" he paused dramatically— "I give you Miss Binnie Howard herself!"

There was a scattered flurry of applause. Scott gave her a hand up to the platform, and for a nervous moment Binnie could only stand there gazing down into that bouquet of expectant faces. But then, from out of the great blur she could make out clearly Clay's lean, dark features. He smiled at her, as if to reassure her, and somehow, that smile gave

her all the confidence Binnie needed.

"Thank you," she said. "It was mighty kind and neighborly of all of you to come to our little blowout tonight, and I hope you're enjoying yourselves."

There was another round of applause, this time more hearty. Binnie went on:

"Tomorrow, we'll begin daily trips to Cactus Springs and back. You'll be able to find the weekly schedules posted in the newspaper, and in the office here. In a little while, we'll bring the coaches round in front for your inspection. They've been re-modeled and re-done, and re-painted a bright purple—in keeping with our new name, The Purple Stage Line Company. We guarantee plenty of safe traveling on their trips.

"Also for your inspection—" here she looked as far away from Clay as she could— "is our special added feature!"

She nodded to Scott, who in turn beckoned around the corner of the depot building. And there then appeared, from where they had been keeping out of sight, two girls dressed in identical outfits of purple-and-gray. The outfits were brief and saucy—rakish cavalry cap, sleeveless military tunic, short skirt, gauntlets and boots. One of the girls was a blonde, the other a brunette—and both were the most eye-appealing of all the girls who had answered Binnie's cryptically worded advertisement a few days ago.

They just smiled at the crowd, who appeared to have lost the use of their collective tongues. They just gawked at the pair.

Binnie said, "One of these girls will be along on each trip. She will be a sort of—well, a hostess, who will make sure that the passengers are all comfortable and taken care of and will see that they're not bored—"

She was cut short by the sudden outburst of approving roars. The men whistled and clapped and stamped their feet as well, while the womenfolk made excited chin-music among themselves. Binnie had counted on just such a reaction, and she knew it would pay off in the cash till as soon as the stage line started to run.

She stepped down from the platform and slipped away from the people now beginning to cluster around the gleaming purple coaches. But she had reckoned without Clay Martin again. He was waiting for her just beyond the depot office.

"Nice goin'," he remarked dryly. "With inducements like that, I may soon be ridin' your stages myself."

Binnie made him a mocking curtsey. "Please do, Mr. Martin," she said.

He grinned. "When does the blonde trip leave? Or isn't that posted on the schedule?"

"You would," she said. "But tell me, Clay, how do you like my stage-line warming?"

He peered around. Some of the crowd had gone back to their dancing; others were still exclaiming about the coaches. Binnie thought, with a tiny shiver: *Hurry up, Clay. We're all alone. Hurry up.*

"Me," he said, "I came for the stage-line owner." At last, his arms went around her. But he didn't kiss her—not yet.

"Look, Binnie," he said. "The novelty of the girls'll wear off soon enough. And then where'll you be? Still buckin' competition from me. Why don't you marry

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me and forget all about this tomfoolery?"

The rising storm of anger brought on by the first half of his speech, was overcome by the amazement incurred by the second.

"Marry you?" she could only echo.

"Sure. Why not?"

She slipped out of his arms. *Why not. . . . Why not.*

She said, carefully, "So you think this stagecoach company is gonna go bust again?"

He shrugged. "You'll soon be hollerin' calf rope. Only a matter of time."

"Only a matter of time. I see," she said evenly.

"If you're gonna be stubborn an' refuse to chuck this thing," he went on, unperturbed, "I'll give you your choice."

"Yes?" She fairly hissed it.

"You can marry me now—or you can come a-runnin' after the Purple Stage has failed. My offer'll still hold good."

FROM having lived on a ranch the nineteen years of her life, Binnie knew some language that would peel the hide off a Gila monster. But she checked herself from blowing a stirrup just in time. So he was inviting her to come a-running, was he? So he expected her to be caught in her own loop, did he? Well—he was in for a few little surprises.

Binnie would just take him up on it! He was probably all gurgle and no guts anyway. Let him stew in his own juices a spell, while she went ahead and made a whopping success of her stagecoach line!

"I reckon you've got me buffaloed," she said meekly. "All right, Clay. If I go bust —I'll come a-running!"

Before he could reply to that, another figure loomed up alongside of them.

"Binnie," Scott Barnes said, "I'd like a word with you." He glared at Clay. Belligerence seemed to spark between the two men.

"How does it feel to be workin' for a woman again, Barnes?" Clay asked. "Does standin' behind her skirts have anythin' to do with all that *dinero* I hear you've been losin' down at The Black Ace?"

"Why, you—" Scott's hand flew to the holster at his hip.

Binnie said, "Get out of here, Clay. Vamoose pronto!"

"I'm gettin'," said Clay. He smiled at Binnie, wryly. "But don't worry. I'll be waitin' when you come a-runnin'."

He moved off. Scott's eyes narrowed as he watched him leave. "What in blazes did he mean by that?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Binnie said wearily. "Nothing at all."

Scott looked glum. "Martin's got an ace or two up his sleeve, mark my words," he warned. "He'd stop at nothin' to put you out of business."

Binnie glanced at him, frowning. "Scott, you don't really think he'd try that holdup stuff with me, do you?"

"Afraid so, Binnie." The redhead's face was clearly etched in the moonlight. "I don't want to discourage you none. But I don't want you gettin' your hopes up too high either."

Binnie said, "I'm not afraid. You saw how the folks went for us tonight."

"Just the same," said Scott, and his hand cupped her chin to tilt it up to him. "Don't feel too bad if you shouldn't make out—if Martin should prove too strong for us."

"I'm not afraid," she repeated.

Scott kissed her then, full on the lips.

"Marry me, Binnie," he said. "I'll look out for you."

She blinked. Two proposals in one night.

"Why, Scott," she parried glibly, "and here I was counting on you looking out for me anyway."

His hands caught her shoulders more gripped them firmly. "Don't joke," he said. "I'm crazy-loco about you, Binnie."

"Scott," she whispered. Desperately, she sought a way—any way—out. "Look, Scott," she pleaded. "Let me try my hand with the stage line first. If it doesn't work out, I'll—I'll think about marrying you. And if it does— Well, I'll see."

The redhead sucked in his breath. "You mean—you mean you'd marry me if you were put out of business?" he said slowly.

His hands caught her shoulders more tightly. He was hurting her. "Yes," she gasped.

He let her go then, but not before he had kissed her again. "That's all I wanted

to know," he said. "Let's get back to the party." She accompanied him back to the merry-making, but her heart wasn't it. Two proposals in one night, yes—but surely no girl had ever received any under stranger circumstances!

If I become a successful stage line owner, thought Binnie bleakly, *I shall prob'ly have to settle down to a lifetime of spinsterhood!*

CHAPTER THREE

Scalawag Desperado

WHEN the first stagecoach left for Cactus Springs the following morning, it was amidst a hail of good-bys and well wishes from the folks who had come out to witness its departure. Binnie breathed a great sigh of relief. She had done all she could. From here on on the fate of The Purple Stage Line was in other hands.

And for the next few weeks, it certainly seemed as though she were in Lady Luck's favor. The purple coaches carried a full load of passengers and freight, plus hostess, on each journey. Binnie was able to pay back her creditors and make good on salary promises to the drivers, guards and girls. Junction Center's new stage line was well on its way to becoming a distinctly profitable venture.

Then, one morning, a portly, overdressed gentleman stepped into the depot office.

"One fare to Cactus Springs," he announced, pulling a swollen purse from his swallowtail coat pocket.

Binnie began pleasantly, "If you'll just step outside, there's a ticket-seller who will—"

He put up a silencing hand. "I make no deals with trifling ticket-sellers," he said, and placed three gold coins on the desk. "Do you know who I am?"

Scott, who had been going over the weekly schedule with Binnie, now spoke up sharply. "No, and what's more, stranger—"

"Daniel Norton," said the man. "Now what were you saying, young fellow?"

Binnie knew that name. It belonged to one of the wealthiest men in the country, a cattle baron who, some said, could buy and sell the western territories ten times over.

"I want passage on tomorrow's trip to Cactus Springs," he continued. "And one thing more—" he cleared his throat, coughed nervously. "I'll be shipping a strongbox along with me."

Silently, Binnie made out a ticket and pushed it across the desk to him. He carefully patted it into his vest pocket, nodded good-by, and left.

"Did you hear that?" Scott said slowly. "His strongbox."

Binnie was busy filling in the cargo listing for the box. "We'll put an extra guard on that trip, just to make sure," she said.

But Scott was still shaking his head. "If Clay Martin ever gets wind of this," he murmured, "there'll be trouble a-plenty."

"There'll be no trouble at all," she said firmly. "Now where were we on that schedule?"

Toward sunset that afternoon, as Binnie was about to lock up for the day, Clay strode into the office.

"I won't let you do it," he said abruptly.

"Won't let me do what?" Her voice wavered slightly, for it was the first time she had spoken to him since the night of the party.

"I've heard the rumors. Daniel Norton's travelin' by your line. Like as not, he's shippin' some gold, too."

Binnie knew her face had betrayed the truth. "Well, why not?" she demanded. "I run a public line. Anyone at all can purchase fare—and I can sell tickets and cargo space to whomever I please! If Daniel Norton chose not to use your line, that's your hard luck!"

"Hang it, Binnie!" He scowled. "That's not the point at all! It's just that by carryin' Norton and his gold on your coach, you're sending an invite to every highwayman and bandit between here and Cactus Springs!"

"Including yourself?" asked Binnie coolly. "If you don't mind, Clay Martin, I'll take my chances."

He swore. "Then you're not gonna get either one of your hostesses to go along on that trip—I'll see to it myself. And they're the only reason Norton's usin'

your stage line and not mine, anyway!"

Binnie refused to be spooked. She reached for her bonnet, settled it on her head, and tied the strings. With that, she proceeded to walk out of the office, straight past him.

The next day, fifteen minutes before the stagecoach was due to leave, the driver came up to Binnie with a worried expression on his face.

"Neither o' the girls'll go on the trip," he told her. "They say it's askin' for trouble. I couldn't find Mr. Barnes around to tell him."

So! Clay made good on his threat. Binnie clenched her fists, till the nails dug into her palms.

"Tell Jane to bring me her uniform," she said. "I always did want to find out what a ride on a good stage line was like!"

Ten minutes later, partly arrayed in the trim purple-and-gray outfit, Binnie boarded the stagecoach. Daniel Norton was already there, along with all the morning's riders. He gulped, nodded, his eyes popping at her transformation.

Binnie said: "I'm the new stagecoach hostess. . . . Pile in, boys!" Up front, the driver cracked his whip, and they were off.

Binnie distributed extra cushions and made gay chatter with the others, but there was no need for her to go out of her way. For mile after mile of the bumpy road traveling, Daniel Norton dominated the conversation of the little group. He rambled on and on about his cattle, his land, his ranches, his possessions . . . until several of the passengers fell asleep in self-defense.

YAWNING, even Binnie was starting in to doze, when suddenly the stagecoach gave an enormous lurch, listed to one side then the other, and came to a screeching, grating stop. "What is it? What happened?" The cries rose from all about her.

Binnie tried to quiet the passengers, while her own heart set up its own deafening tumult. She managed to undo the door, and was just about to step outside and see what was wrong—when the handle was violently turned from the other side.

"Out, everybody!" came a muffled voice. "Quick and peaceful like!"

A masked man stood outside, one six-gun leveled at the stage driver and guards, the other at the frightened passengers.

"All right," he said, when they had all trooped out into the morning sunshine. "Which one of you is Daniel Norton?"

No one spoke up. And then one bony old gentleman said in a piping shrill:

"I protest. This is an outrage! I'll—"

The gun barrel wavered ever so slightly, and centered on his stomach. The bony old gentleman said no more.

"You, hostess," said the masked man. "Which one here is Daniel Norton?"

"He canceled his trip at the last moment," Binnie said calmly. "He's not here."

She was sure that the gunman was smiling behind his mask. "I'll tend to you later, my luscious little liar," he said. And then, gruffly, "All right, driver. We'll forget about Norton. Get up there and hand me down his strongbox."

That was too much for the wealthy cattle rancher. He stepped forward. "But you can't! There's over fifteen thousand dollars in gold in there!"

"Thanks for the figures," the bandit snapped. "Now let's have it, driver!"

The driver did as he was told. In a few minutes, he was climbing down with the metal box. At the masked man's order, he placed it down in the dirt at the roadside.

Then the gunman said, "All right, all of you. Back in there! Pronto!"

Gratefully, they scurried back inside the stagecoach. Binnie would have followed them, but suddenly, she felt a hand grasp her elbow.

"Not you, hostess," the robber said. "You're stayin' with me."

He waved to the stage driver. "On your way!"

He didn't have to say it twice. In another few seconds, all that remained of the purple stagecoach was a great cloud of dust on the road to Cactus Springs.

While Binnie could only stand by in helpless fury, the gunman shot away the lock on the strongbox. Next he opened it, removed the bags of gold, and transferred them to the saddlebags of his horse, a roan which was quietly grazing behind a near-

by clump of sage. Then he turned to her.

"Be the first time Pepper here ever rode with a hostess," the badman remarked cheerfully. "Probably won't be no living with him after this."

"Very funny," said Binnie.

The next moment she was swung up on the roan. The gunman mounted behind her. "Get goin', Pepper," he said.

They took a little used desert trail back to Junction Center. Her companion prattled merrily, all the way, but Binnie just gritted her teeth, and hung on to the saddle horn.

"A poor sort of hostess you are," he said once. "Why don't you take care of me, see that I'm comfortable?"

"When I take care of you, it won't be to make you comfortable!" Binnie shot back.

He chuckled, and for a while there was no conversation. Just before they came to the town limits, though, he brought the roan to a halt.

"Sorry, hostess," he said, "but I'm gonna have to put you off here."

He dismounted, reached up for Binnie, and set her gently on her feet.

"Sure enjoyed your company, ma'am," he said fervently. "Sorry we have to kiss good-by now."

With that, he bent his head, lifted the lower corner of his bandanna-mask a little —and kissed her, quickly but thoroughly.

Binnie remained passive in his embrace, but them, just as he was about to straighten up again, her hand came up, and a fingernail raked a swift line across his cheek, just below his right eye.

"Hey—"

She didn't stop to hear the rest. Lifting her skirt elegantly high, she took to her heels and half ran, half stumbled the remaining distance into Junction Center.

CHAPTER FOUR

Who's a Kiss-Bandit Now?

BACK in the depot, the office was deserted. Scott was nowhere to be seen. Binnie slumped into a chair, and wished she could cry and be done with it. But the tears wouldn't come. It was almost evening before Scott showed up. He seemed tired and worn, and at sight of Binnie sitting quietly behind the big desk, Scott Barnes' eyes fairly bugged.

"Binnie! Are you all right? I've been scared plumb out of my wits!"

"I'm all right," she said. Tonelessly, she related what had occurred.

When she had finished, his fist pounded into his palm. "It was Martin, that dirty—" he began.

Just then, there was the sound of a commotion outside. Binnie jumped up and ran to the door, to meet up with three distraught-looking men, the stagecoach driver and guards from the morning's trip.

"We just got back from Cactus Springs," the driver told her breathlessly. "And Miss Binnie, guess what—"

"What?" fearfully.

"We was held up again this morning," one of the guards put in. "Not half an hour after we left you and the gunman, another masked hombre stopped us on the road."

"Seemed powerful upset when he discovered someone else had beat him to old Norton's strongbox," the driver said.

The other guard added, "And that you was missin', too."

"It sure beats all," said the driver.

Binnie thanked them, and they clumped out, shaking their heads.

"It does beat all," she said to Scott. "How come the *two* holdups?"

"I told you we were askin' for trouble a-plenty," the redheaded manager said, but he seemed puzzled himself.

And was it her imagination, Binnie asked herself—or was he keeping his face averted from her?

"Scott,"

He turned, looked at her directly. "Yes?"

"Nothing," she said. "Would—would you care to walk me back to the hotel?"

There had been no sign of a scratch or mark on his right cheek. . . .

The next day there were no trips to Cactus Springs for the Purple Stage Line for the simple reason that there were no passengers. Word of the two holdups had plainly gotten around. Both hostesses suddenly announced that they were quitting anyway to be married, and the drivers shuffled around the office, grumbling in their beards. Scott, too, appeared to be disturbed by something.

Binnie hadn't slept too well that night. The second holdup kept teasing her. Why had there been *another* one? At last she could stand it no longer.

"I'm going over to see Clay Martin," she announced to Scott. "You stay here and keep an eye on things."

She headed back toward the other stage depot. Fortunately, no arrivals or departures were taking place; the scene was a quiet one. Binnie stepped inside.

Clay was at his desk, and one look at him told Binnie all she had wanted to know. Now she was going to have to play a lone and wary hand with him.

"Clay," she said simply. "I came a-walking—but only on account of I'm plumb tired of running."

He stared at her, as if she were some sort of apparition.

"Binnie," he said hoarsely. "What in blazes do you mean?"

She sat down in the other chair. "I mean the Purple Stage Line is finished, through, wiped out. The holdup yesterday did the trick. We've lost all our business."

"But—"

She heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I know when I'm licked," she said. "I'm a failure. So I'm here to say I'm gonna marry you—like I promised."

He gulped. "You—you're gonna marry me?"

She nodded, so vehemently her blonde curls appeared to dance along her neck.

"Yes," she said. "But only because I've gone out of business . . . like I promised you I would."

"Stop sayin' you promised be!" he shouted.

Binnie's eyes widened. "Why, Clay."

He said, coldly, "I'm sorry, Binnie. You—you don't have to make good on your word. You don't have to marry me!"

"I don't?"

He didn't look at her. "I'm the jasper who held Norton up yesterday," he said. "I'm the masked robber who took the gold—who rode away with you."

Binnie stood up. "I know," she said quietly. "It still shows where I scratched you. But Clay," almost beseechingly, "why? Why'd you do it?"

He shrugged. "Let's say it was to put you out of business, cause I thought I wanted to marry you, and you had—"

"Let's say different," came another voice. "Let's say it was so you could wallow in velvet on Norton's gold!"

Binnie looked around, then quickly got to the side. Scott had come into the office, his gun drawn—and he was taking a careful bead on Clay's heart!

"Hello, Barnes," Clay said. "I figgered you'd be showin' up sooner or later."

"Come on," said Scott. "Let's have that money!"

"Don't, Scott," Binnie whispered. "I'll go get the sheriff—"

Clay said, "He'd rather you wouldn't, Binnie. You see, our tinhorn friend wants the money for himself."

"Where is it?" Scott demanded.

Clay grinned. "Wouldn't you love to know?"

"Where is it?"

"The only reason I helped myself to Norton's gold," Clay went on, "was to get to it ahead of you. And I hear tell I made it just in time, too."

GRIMLY, Binnie's chaotic thoughts were falling into place rapidly. The second holdup. . . . It was all beginning to make sense at last. Before she had been sure that Clay— But now she really knew the truth. It was Scott, of course!

"I knew you were up to your ears in gambling debts," Clay went on. "Soon as I heard about Norton making the trip, I figgered you'd be pulling something like that."

He turned to Binnie. "This here's the hombre who ran Miss Eliza out of business, too. Pulled holdups on the passengers so he could pay off his debts. As stage-line manager, he knew just when and and on whom all the loot was to be found! The same went for freight. I've always had my suspicions—this time I know for sure!"

"You lie," Scott said, but his left eyebrow had set to twitching. "Everyone knew it was your father's doin'. Binnie, you don't believe him, do you?"

She couldn't afford to hesitate. "Of course not, Scott," she said. "He's a sidewinder from way back. Let's get out of here."

"Not before we take that gold with us,"

said Scott Barnes, wagging that loaded gun again.

"What do we care about gold?" Binnie said. "We can report him to the sheriff, then take over his stage company for ourselves when he's locked up in the hoosgow. Probably you'll even get a reward from Daniel Norton for this."

Scott's eyes narrowed craftily, but he didn't move. "First the gold," he said.

Binnie tugged at his arm. "Scott, you haven't forgotten, have you? That I'm gonna marry you now that I'm ruined?"

She saw the look of disbelief that flitted across Clay's face, but she was playing for dangerous stakes now.

The redhead said, "You win, Binnie. We both heard him confess to the holdup. Come on—we'll hunt up the sheriff."

He backed out of the room, gun still leveled at Clay. Binnie slipped out behind him.

"Scott," she said, when they were on the landing platform, "aren't you gonna kiss your bride first?"

"Binnie! This is no time to—"

But she put her arms around his neck and clung to him with all her strength. Clung to him until Clay came hurtling outside after them.

He wrenched Scott out of her grasp, held him off at arm's length, then launched a vicious right-hand smash to his jaw. The redhead crumpled, hit the dirt and lay still.

Binnie didn't look at Clay. She stepped over Scott's sprawled body, and went on next door, into the hotel. Once in her room, she dragged the two carpetbags out of the cupboard and proceeded to stuff them once more with her belongings.

So Clay had no intention of marrying her anyway, she thought wildly, as clothes and boots alike went flying into the bags. Disregarding all the entanglements and mixups involving Scott, when the showdown had come, and she had announced herself out of business, Clay had backed down and said: *You don't have to marry me.*

Binnie had no hankering to remain in Junction Center one hour longer. She'd go back to the ranch, where the men might not be so all-fired good looking, but where, at least, they'd marry a girl who came a-running. She'd get one of her own drivers to take her into Cactus Springs, she told herself, so she wouldn't have to exit the way she had come in, on ornery Clay Martin's fool, blasted stage line.

Downstairs, she informed the clerk. "Let me have my bill, please. I'm leaving."

"The lady is not leavin'," someone said from behind her. "She's stayin' right here."

The desk clerk looked from her to Clay. "Which is it?"

"I'm leaving," said Binnie.

"She's stayin'," said Clay.

Binnie said, "Why wouldn't you marry me then?"

Clay said, "Because you told me you were only willing on account of you had been put out of business. Not because you loved me. Besides, I felt guilty about havin' stolen that gold." He added, hastily, "But only, like I said—to prevent Scott from doin' so. Norton got it back by special messenger. Hey! What about your promisin' to wed up with Scott if you were ruined?"

"Who's ruined?" Binnie murmured. "I'll have you know I'm a—"

"Which is it?" asked the clerk.

"I'm leaving," said Binnie.

"She's stayin'," said Clay. "How about it, Binnie? If you love me, we'll get hitched, and then we'll run a combined stagecoach line together — bigger than ever before."

"Well . . ."

"We'll even have hostesses on the line, like you used to have," Clay said persuasively.

"No hostesses," Binnie said firmly. And then, "Oh, Clay, you—you sidewinder, you! I do love you so very much!"

His arms were around her, and he was kissing the daylights out of her. But his mouth on hers was all the sunshine she would ever need.

"Which is it?" the desk clerk said wearily.

"I'm staying," said Binnie.

"She's leavin'," said Clay. As Binnie looked up at him in happly bewilderment, "We're hightailin' it into Cactus Springs right now—to find us a preacher!"

THE END

(Continued from page 75)

From One Texan to Another

Dear Editor:

I am a 16-year-old girl from Texas, with green eyes and brown wavy hair. I am tall, as most Texans are, and slender.

I would like to meet some other Texans who would be interested in writing and telling me facts about Texas, as I came to the Canal Zone very young and don't remember it.

ROSE MARY PARKER
Box 399
Balboa, Canal Zone

She's From Missouri

Dear Editor:

I am a Dutch girl who would like to have pen pals from all over the world. I am 18 years old, about 5 ft. 7 in. tall, with medium-brown hair and eyes.

I like all kinds of sports. Dancing and horseback riding are my favorites. Collecting movie star photographs is my hobby. I have traveled quite a bit.

So, come on fellows and girls from 18 to 23, how about dropping a few lines my way? I promise to answer all letters.

BILLIE ANN WEIXELDORFER
3709 Roberts
Kansas City, Mo.

Ride Herd on This Rhymster

Dear Editor:
6 ft. 2, with eyes of gray,
168 is what I weigh.
Single? You bet, why natch,
Classification—tall old batch!
Under 40, over 20,
Brunettes and blondes I like but plenty!
Like to travel, write and read,
Lots of mail is what I need!
My job hasn't too much appeal,
It's only a truck I daily wheel.
Now here's my wish, my hope, my call—
Honey chiles from the south—Please write, yo'all!

EDWARD BRANDT
1571 West Central Avenue
Toledo 6, Ohio

Cornflower Blue-Eyed Maiden

Dear Editor:

Here is a plea for pen pals from a Canadian girl who knows you will be kind enough to give her a little space in your Pony Express.

I'm 19 years old, 5 ft. 2½ in. tall. I've almost black hair, a tan complexion, with rosy cheeks and cornflower-blue eyes. People say they can see the devil shining in them at a glance.

I take part in almost every sport and was once a Canadian Swimming Champion. Can handle water and snow skis, tennis rackets, horses etc. But my ambition is to become a rancher.

I should especially like to hear from those on a ranch, both boys and girls, but letters from anyone else would be most welcome.

DOROTHEA HUGHES
1050 Allard Avenue
Verdun, Quebec Canada

Greetings From South Africa

Dear Editor

I am 18 years old, 6 ft. 3 in. tall, weig? 198 lbs. I have a medium build with black wavy hair, brown eyes and a tan complexion.

I am just an average South African boy who likes swimming, hiking, hunting, fishing and riding. Well—just about all outdoor sports.

Just lately I have found out what swell fun it is to have many pen friends, so now my favorite hobby and pastime is writing and receiving letters.

Every and anyone who reads and answers this plea may be assured of a reply. I will send a snap of myself while they last.

GORDON SCHROEDER
85 Burger Street
Krugersdrop
Transvaal, South Africa

Joan's Seeking Johnny

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to break into the Pony Express. I am trying to locate a boy that I used to know about 7 years ago. He used to live in Denver, Colorado. I don't exactly remember the address, but it was next door to me, and my address was 1314 Gaylord. His name is John James. He should be about 17 or 18 years old. If anyone knows or has heard of him, let me know or tell him to write. Just for old times sake, that's all.

I'm about 5 ft. 8 in. have blue eyes and brown hair. I like all sports and writing to people. I'll be looking for some letters from all you nice people.

JOAN JOHNSON
Route 2
Marion, Ky.

Tuffy's a Pert Sophmore

Dear Editor:

Say, guys and gals, how about dropping me a line or two? I'm a-rootin' and a-tootin' eager to—and on my solemn vow, I promise to answer all letters that I receive. Love to hear from people, especially from ages 15 to 18.

I have black hair, brown eyes, and stand 5 ft. 3 in. tall. I'm 16 years old and a sophomore in high school. Willing to swap pictures with pen pals. My interests are music, dancing and corresponding. How about writing, huh?

HELEN "TUFFY" ADACHI
Care of California Packing Corp.
Kualapuu, Molokai
Territory of Hawaii

Bob's Extra Special

Dear Editor:

Girls! Boys! Young ladies— Anyone!

That's what I want for friends, so how about writing to this Colorado farm boy?

I am 16 years, with brown hair and gray eyes. I'm 5 ft. 10 in. tall and weigh 143 lbs. I really like music, movies and sports in a big way. I want to hear from everyone who really wants a Colorado friend.

Young or old—write. All letters or cards will be answered extra promptly.

ALDEE (BOB) MILLER
307 Connecticut Road
City Route No. 12
Grand Junction, Colorado

Blue-Eyed Trailer-ette

Dear Editor:

Your pen pal would like to hear from people all over the world—anyone from the age of 18 to 50.

I'm 28 years old, stand 5 ft. 2 in. tall, and have blue eyes and light brown hair. Since I now travel around in a trailer, I can write about that life to anyone who wants to know. I'm a post card collector, and also will trade souvenirs of Florida for any coins from foreign lands.

JESSIE F. DADSWELL
General Delivery
Inverness, Florida

Where's Jessie Root?

Dear Editor:

Will you please print this in the Pony Express?

Anyone who reads this and knows anything about my father, Jessie Root, please write me. You may be able to bring us together after 12 years. Write me if you know of him.

MRS. LOUELLA UNDERWOOD
Box 167
Eureka, Utah

Blue-Eyed Flora

Dear Editor:

I have tried several times to join your Pony Express, but have had no success.

I am a girl of 21 years, with blonde hair and blue eyes. I am very fond of all sports. Roller skating and football are my favorites. I have been a patient here for a year, and my only enjoyment is listening to my radio and writing letters. I promise to answer all letters received.

FLORA MASCH
Bowne Mem. Hosp.
Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Khaki-Clad Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

We are two soldiers who would like to have some pen pals.

Jim: Age 22, weight 142 lbs., 5 ft. 8½ in. tall, hazel eyes, brown hair. He likes just about all kinds of sports. The ones he likes best are sailboating and fishing. Not bad looking either.

Tollie: Age 22, weight 170, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, blue eyes, brown hair. He also likes all kinds

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of sports, with horseback riding and flying his favorites. He owns his own plane. Home is in California.

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HOMER "JIM" SCHRADER, 18329525
and
TOLLIE H. OWENS, JR., 19330757
Post Fire Dept. Box No. 3
Fort Sherman, Canal Zone

Versatile Ruth

Dear Editor:

I am a farm girl of 12. I have light brown hair and dark brown eyes. I am 5 ft. tall and the only child in the family. We have just moved and I don't know many pepple, so I thought I might ride on the Pony Express.

Besides collecting books, stones, paper dolls, movie-star pictures and marbles, I cook and sew a little. Also design clothes, write songs, stories and poems. I love animals, flowers and such as well as liking to ride horses, hike and go picknicking. My branded Western cowpony is blind.

I would like to hear from people all over the world from the ages of 6 to 60 and especially from 10 to 17. Come on, guys and gals, give a farm girl mail until I wear the hinges off the mailbox.

RUTH E. LIPSCOMB
Route 1,
Lasson, W. Va.

All-Around Briton

Dear Editor:

Could you please print my appeal for pen pals in the Pony Express, as I would like very much to correspond with other boys or girls of around my age in the United States?

I am 16 years of age, around 5 ft. 7 in. tall, have blond hair and blue eyes. I weigh around 126 lbs. My hobbies are shooting, reading, cycling, and most outdoor sports. I'll answer all letters right away, so here's hoping someone will reply.

JAMES MICHAEL BLAKE
8, Mousehold Lane
Sprowston, Norwich
Norfolk, England

Browsing and Musing

Dear Editor:

Can the Pony Express change its course and fill my mailbox full of letters? Out here in the country there isn't much for us to do.

I was born in the hills of West Virginia. I have three children of my own, am 31 years old, with blue eyes, brown hair. I weigh 110 lbs., am 5 ft. 6 in. tall. My husband is an ex-navy man. I would love hearing from other pen pals. I love music, Western movies, reading and writing.

Please write, everyone all over.

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Custer City, Pa.

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*Name*_____
*Occupation*_____ *Age*_____
*Address*_____ *City*_____
*Zone*____ *County*_____ *State*_____

RULES:
You must be amateur. Our students not eligible. Make copy of girl 5 inches high. Pencil or pen only. Omit lettering. All drawings must be received by April 30, 1949. None returned. Winners notified. If desired, send stamped, self-addressed envelope for list of winners.

PONY EXPRESS

Just Jungle Tales

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Rhodesian girl of 16 years. I have dark brown hair and green eyes. I am 5 ft. 6 in. tall, and weigh 130 lbs. My hobbies are hunting and all outdoor sports. I would like to write to any serviceman or civilian in America who is interested in the African jungles, as I can tell them many interesting tales, seeing that I live right in them.

SELENA HAKIME
N Kana Hotel, Kitive,
Northern Rhodesia, Africa

Musical Kitty

Dear Editor:

Here's a little about myself: I stand around 5 ft. 9 in. tall and weigh 160 lbs. I am 18 years old and have curly reddish-black hair. I love horseback riding, flying, motorcycle riding, hiking and writing letters.

I'm precisely the Western type gal—happiest in a pair of jeans, boots, and plaid shirts. I would like to hear from people from all over, particularly the real cowboys—and especially from a State Trooper of LaVale Barracks C, with the initials T. B.

Very interested in music, my favorite type is Western and hillbilly songs. I also play the guitar very well.

I will swap pics with anyone who wishes to do so, and I will send anyone copies of my songs if they want them.

KITTY WEESE
958 Glenwood Street
Cumberland, Maryland

Freezin' in Alaska

Dear Editor:

Can the Pony Express change its course and come to Alaska and cram my mailbox full? Far north here, there's nothing much to do. It's awfully cold. I'm stationed here at Ladd Field. I'm 19 years old, with brown hair and brown eyes. I'm 5 ft. 9½ in. tall. I am known to be quite entertaining and a great joker.

My favorite sports are roller skating and horseback riding. I have a hobby of poster cards, and am crazy about writing and receiving letters.

Kids, let's keep the Pony Express busy on this route.

CPL. WALTER HEIM, #17224504
Maint. Sqdn. Comp. Wing
APO 731, c/o PM
Seattle, Wash.

Lorraine's a Southern Belle

Dear Editor:

I wonder if I might hop aboard the Pony Express and find a host of pen friends. I am a black-haired, brown-eyed country girl from southeastern Alabama and am strictly a you-all miss.

In my spare time I cook, sew, and write letters —when I'm not reading the current R.R. I also

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I almost forgot to say I've just celebrated my 19th birthday.

LORRAINE S. GRIMES
R. F. D. No. 3
Elba, Ala.

A Lonesome Buddy

Dear Editor:

Here's my bid for some pen pals. I am a G. I. stationed deep in the heart of Texas, 26 years of age, have red wavy hair, and am 5 ft. 8 in. tall.

I'd be very happy to correspond with anyone, especially those of the opposite sex, and any of my ex-buddies at Mather Air Force Base. Who knows, I might be around your way some day for a visit, pen pals, so drop me a line.

T/SGT. JOE L. RASKA, AF 18004966
Squadron A
Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas

Keep sending them in, pals. We'll be printing as many as we can. And remember—even if your letter doesn't get printed, you can, sure as shootin', lasso some of your own pals by writing direct to them.

Adios, amigos, until next month.

(Continued from page 6)

The sign trembled.

"Open up!" Janice repeated. "Or I'll back my burro up to this tumble-down shack and have him kick it to pieces."

The girl inside withdrew her arm in a hurry, letting the sign fall. Seconds later Janice saw a shadowy movement inside the store, indicating that the girl was retreating.

Thinking quickly, Janice reasoned that the back door was likely unlocked. Once inside, she reckoned she could handle the girl clerk, so she ducked away and ran around the building as fast as she could—right into Phil Sampson, who had guessed what she was up to and had cut around the other side of the store.

Janice had run into him so hard she was momentarily dazed and, before she knew it, he had her arms pinned to her sides.

"You silly little fool," Phil said. "You can't buck the Lazy S. The Lazy S can swallow up your outfit in one bite and not even get a bellyache. Why don't you sell your scrawny cows and go back where you came from?"

"Because I bought the Bee Ranch," she told him, "and if I had thought of selling out before, nothing could make me do it now. I just don't take to being pushed around."

The man's gray eyes appraised her with some admiration.

"In this country we like folks who fight," he told her. "But not folks who fight the Lazy S. I'll give you a crew to take you back to Texas."

"No!" she said.

"Then I'll have to collect for that slap you gave me before," he said, and before she knew what he was up to, he kissed her.

"Usually," he said with a grin, "I get slapped after the kiss—not before."

And he kissed her again, sharp and hard on the lips, rocking her to her heels and holding her so tightly she could not move at all. He lifted his head a moment to look at her again in his calculating manner. "You're a mighty pretty little filly, and you've got guts. That kiss is the sweetest I've ever tasted."

"You do that again—" she said— "and I'll —I'll go get my rifle and plug you, sure as my name is Janice Britten."

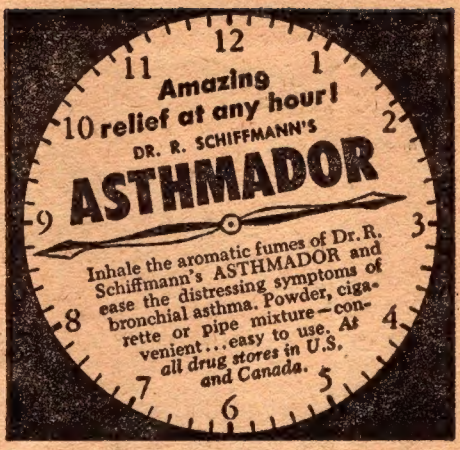
So he backed her up against the building where she could not get a good swing at his shins, and he kissed her for a third time. It was like being caught in the end of the world—or maybe the beginning. Janice's heart raced.

When he broke it off, Phil's smile was slight. "After that, I won't mind being shot," he said.

Sure enough, there's plenty of kicking and kissing when salty Janice is around—and she'll be tearing through these pages after that scalawag rancher, Phil Sampson. Write in and tell us what you think of "MAVERICK MINX' MAN-TROUBLE," the feature novel in the June RANGELAND ROMANCES—published April 27th.

We'll be seein' you again then, friends.

The Editor.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KENDEX COMPANY - BABYLON, 29, N. Y.

(Continued from page 69)

Vic Wyatt looked at the unhappy girl wearily.

"How did you know," whispered Bonnie, feeling the world reeling away from her, "what they planned?"

"I trailed you last night. I knew you'd make a bee-line for Leon Petrew to warn him. I heard everything that Ed and Petrew said."

"Oh," murmured Bonnie blankly.

"I let you go on back home so they wouldn't become suspicious. Besides I didn't know but what you already knew the lay-out." He sounded bleak and resigned.

"Then later this morning I decided that guilty or not, you were too young to get caught with that bunch—and I aimed to kidnap you and take you into town, give you a fresh start whether you wanted it or not. But, when I went to get you—you were gone. You came here to keep me away from that dynamite trap. . . ."

Bonnie turned away from him, her slender shoulders drooping. He hadn't needed her to save him after all. In fact, he was probably laughing at her all the time.

"I g-guess I'll be going," she choked out.

She turned blindly toward the door and found him blocking her way. His large hands closed on her shoulders, faced her around. "Doesn't your offer still stand?"

Bonnie shook her head despairingly. Then she found that he was holding her with all the tenderness in the world and saying gently, "Do you think you have a chance in a million of getting away?"

She clung to him tightly, dizzy with rapture. Through this rosy haze of unreality she heard him planning, "We'll ride into Nogales right pronto and be married this evening." He kissed the tumbled curls, the shadowed eyes, and finally the flowerlike pink mouth. "I've loved you like hell in spite of all your monkey-business," he confessed.

Sometime, thought Bonnie, sometime after this evening, she'd tell him about Belle's call. Now they had more important things to think about.

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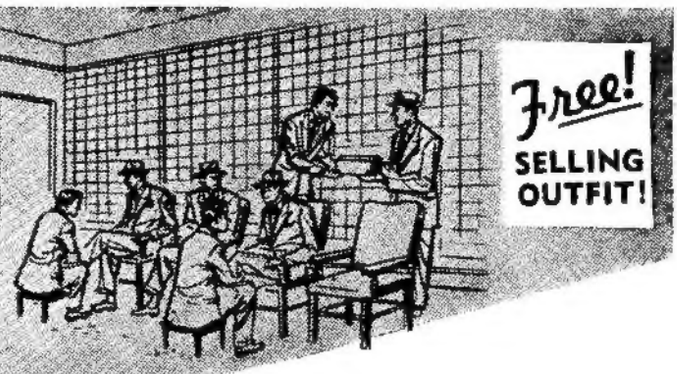

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Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL OPENS DOOR

Recognized by women all over the world as the symbol of quality merchandise, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on Mason Velvet-eez shoes opens doors for you and clinches sales.

PUT A "SHOE STORE BUSINESS" RIGHT IN YOUR POCKET . . . YOU DON'T INVEST A CENT . . . MAKE BIGGER PROFITS . . . NO STORE OVERHEAD... EXCLUSIVE SALES FEATURES BUILD YOUR REPEAT BUSINESS

HUGE NATIONAL ADVERTISING PROGRAM BACKS YOU

● You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in scores of magazines like Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, etc. People know Mason—are eager to get the special Personal Fitting Service we advertise for your benefit. And remember, we pay for all this advertising—it doesn't cost you a cent.

LEO DE MATO, WHO AVERAGES SIX SALES PER DAY, SAYS:

"I have accumulated over 645 customers. The Mason line with commissions up to $3.00 a pair is really SWELL! Not only am I anxious to sell these excellent shoes because it gives me the means to a more comfortable living for my family, but also, I am my own boss with no restrictions or time to account for."

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

Velvet-eez

AIR CUSHION CLINCHES SALES FOR YOU!

When you sell this line, you sell FEATURES—features that no other shoe man can offer the folks in your territory—like this wonderful EXCLUSIVE Velvet-Eez AIR CUSHION that brings day-long comfort to men and women who are on their feet on hard floors and pavements from early morning to late night. The Velvet-Eez Demonstrator you'll get free in your Sales Outfit will clinch sales for you as it has for hundreds of other Mason Shoe Men all over the country!

DON'T DELAY

RUSH THE COUPON NOW!

Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
Dept. M-327, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Set me up for BIG PROFITS in '49! Rush me FREE Selling Outfit featuring Water Buffalo, Zipper and Air Cushion Shoes, Leather Jackets, other fast-sellers. Show me how National Advertising makes more customers and profits for me. Send everything Free and Postpaid. (My own shoe size is .....)

Name .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-327, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

SHEAFFER'S SENTINEL

SENTINEL DELUXE THREESOME
Pen, $15.00—Pencil, $5.00
Stratowriter, $10.00
Complete Set, $30.00; no fed. tax
Available in Blue, Brown and Black

world's greatest pen value at $15.00

Positive down-stroke filler—empties—cleans refills. Easiest to operate!

Giant 14k gold point—hand-ground. Sixteen writing styles!

Exclusive inner-spring clip. Holds pen snugly without danger of tearing pocket!

"Mastermetal" cap, non-corrosive—tarnish-proof. Sentinel's balanced design for distinctive beauty—matchless writing ease!

"Greatest Pen Value" means more for your money! And Sheaffer's Sentinel *gives* you more—finer quality, perfect performance, outstanding beauty—the product of costly materials, skilled craftsmanship and modern mechanical precision. Try Sentinel now for a new experience in writing pleasure!

W. A. Sheaffer Pen Company
Fort Madison, Iowa and Malton, Ont., Can.

SHEAFFER'S
WHITE DOT OF DISTINCTION

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For sale at all good dealers throughout the United States and Canada

A GIFT MEANS MUCH MORE WHEN IT'S MADE BY SHEAFFER'S